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Miri Mikawa

Illustration by Aki

Sugar Apple Fairy Tale



The Silver Sugar Master and the Ivory Aristocrat



Sugar ★ Apple Fairy★ Tale

The Silver Sugar Master and the Ivory Aristocrat

3

Miri Mikawa

Illustration by Aki


NEW YORK

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Sugar Apple Fairy Tale



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The Silver Sugar Master and the Ivory Aristocrat



SON OF
CONFECTIONERS
Jonas

FAIRY
Cathy

FAIRY
Mithril

I wish
I could
turn this
sensation...

SILVER SUGAR
VISCOUNT
Hugh

SILVER SUGAR MASTER &
SILVER SUGAR VISCOUNT
Special artisans deemed worthy by the king to craft sacred
confections are known as Silver Sugar Masters. The top candy
craftsman, the Silver Sugar Viscount, is selected from among
all the Silver Sugar Masters and given the title.

SILVER SUGAR
MASTER IN THE
MAKING
Anne

...into
a sugar
candy
sculpture.

WARRIOR FAIRY
Challe

SILVER SUGAR
MASTER
Kat

Sugar Apple Fairy Tale

The Silver Sugar Master and the Ivory Aristocrat

If there is any place that can be considered holy ground for candy crafters, it is Silver Westol Castle. It is the castle bestowed upon the Silver Sugar Viscount, the greatest of all Silver Sugar Masters. The manor is an elegant work of architecture, with white walls and towers overlooking a lake and a forest.

It serves as a symbol of the rights and recognition given to the Silver Sugar Viscount by the king of Highland.

Becoming a candy crafter and then achieving that position—for most people, it is one of the loftiest dreams imaginable.

The current Silver Sugar Viscount, Hugh Mercury, is a true success story.

After both his parents died when he was young, Hugh lived on the streets with a group of orphans, stealing to survive. From those unexpected beginnings, he became an apprentice candy crafter, then a professional candy crafter, and then a Silver Sugar Master. He was even adopted into the family who founded the Mercury Workshop, and he took on the Mercury name.

And finally, he was awarded the title of Silver Sugar Viscount.

“If things stay as they are, the disaster from twenty years ago will happen all over again. This is my proposal for how to avoid that,” Hugh announced before slowly standing up.

He roughly smoothed down his messy brown hair and put on his simple jacket. He was a noble, but not by birth. Because of that, he made an effort to project an aura of aristocratic elegance.

But his eyes held a wild sharpness and intensity. He was intimidating enough to maintain order in the room.

He was in one of the chambers in the tower of Silver Westol Castle.

It was a small, snug room where Hugh could have meals with his inner circle. The maestros or their representatives from the three major factions of candy crafters were sitting around the table in the middle of the room.

John Killeen, the proxy maestro from the Mercury Workshop.

Elliott Collins, the proxy maestro from the Paige Workshop.

And Marcus Radcliffe, the actual maestro of the Radcliffe Workshop.

Looking at each of them in turn, Hugh smiled broadly.

“Now, I’ve chosen to discuss this with you out of respect for each of the factions. I won’t take no for an answer.”

When Hugh said that, a look of great exasperation appeared on John Killeen’s slim, anxious face. As he adjusted the monocle he wore over his left eye, he turned toward Hugh.

“I support you; I do. But, Viscount, I wish you would have consulted with me beforehand. After all, I am your proxy, in name at least.”

Hugh was still the maestro of the Mercury Workshop. But since it was difficult to concurrently serve as both maestro and Silver Sugar Viscount, he had John Killeen act in his stead.

“Even if I had consulted with you, I’m sure you wouldn’t have opposed me. You’re in agreement,” Hugh said decisively.

John shrugged.

Elliott Collins chuckled and raised his hand casually. “Ah, as am I. I have no objections. It seems like my faction will be in trouble, too, if we don’t act.”

Glen Paige, the maestro of the Paige Workshop, had been bedridden with illness for many years; Elliott, who was in line to be the next maestro, was filling in for him. Elliott had short red hair that stuck out in all directions. He was a cheerful young man whose drooping eyes gave the impression that he was always smiling.

“I, too, have no objections. However, Silver Sugar Viscount...” The last to speak was Marcus Radcliffe.

Hugh, John, and Elliott were around the same age, in their twenties to early thirties; Marcus, meanwhile, was in his fifties. Perhaps because of that, he had a really strong presence in the room.

“...who will take charge of your plan? It’s certainly not something the Silver Sugar Viscount can do on his own.”

“Of course not. The matter will be entrusted to one of the factions.”

“Well then, we will assume responsibility,” Marcus answered immediately.

John scowled, but Elliott offered a round of applause.

“Splendid, Master Radcliffe! You see, we are unable to take the lead. We simply don’t have the resources to tend to the whole kingdom.”

“You’re not eager to do much, are you?”

Even under John’s withering gaze, Elliott did not drop his cheerful smile.

“I mean, it’s the truth. The two of you are free to quarrel over the privilege.”

John turned back to face Marcus.

“We, too, would like to accept the job, Master Radcliffe.”

“Is that a scheme to monopolize major jobs under the authority of the Silver Sugar Viscount?”

“It has nothing to do with him. It’s fundamental to the position of the Viscount that he treat all factions equally. As a representative of one of the factions, I consider this an important job that will unify all candy crafters, so I must submit my name in the running.”

Hugh smiled wryly at John and Marcus, who were glaring at each other.

“Well then, let’s be fair here. Shall we draw lots?”

Just as the last pink rays of the late summer sunset were being chased away by the approaching darkness, the maestros and proxies of the various factions left Silver Westol Castle.

After returning to his private chambers, Hugh opened the sliding glass door that led to his balcony, stretched out on the sofa, and closed his eyes. The lace curtain that hung over the sliding door brushed the tips of his boots as it swayed in the wind.

“Viscount. The evening wind is chilly, and you may catch a cold. I’ve brought you some tea,” Salim said as he closed the balcony door.

Hearing his voice, Hugh opened his eyes.

“You brought tea? What about Lucy?”

“She said you were in a bad mood, and she didn’t want to come. She told me to bring it up to you instead.”

“Right. Her power is reading people’s moods, isn’t it?”

The worker fairy who tended to Hugh’s everyday needs was a little woman who nagged him like a mother-in-law and was oddly forceful despite her small stature. She had no compunctions about putting Salim and the others to work.

Hugh sat up. He stared at Salim’s hands as the younger man placed one set of tea utensils on the table and dexterously poured a cup of tea. Steam rose from the cup.

“Is the Radcliffe Workshop the source of your displeasure?” Salim suddenly asked. “I imagine the cause lies with them taking over that job?”

“Why do you think that it has put me in a foul mood? I’m the one who suggested that we draw lots. Naturally, I had considered the possibility that the Radcliffe Workshop might be chosen.”

“But you wanted to let the Mercury Workshop handle it, didn’t you? Considering her situation. But you weren’t able to do that. The Silver Sugar Viscount is required to treat all factions with impartiality.”

Salim held out the cup, and Hugh frowned as he took it.

“Her?”

“Anne.”

Hugh paused, the cup hovering before his lips.

“If this job ends up being entrusted to the Radcliffe Workshop, she’ll face great hardship, given that she has some unfortunate relations to that faction,” Salim said. “If things go poorly, she might not even get wind that it’s happening.”

“Sure, I suppose that’s right. But there’s nothing I can do about it. Anne chose to tread a difficult path of her own free will,” Hugh replied, then took a sip of tea.

Salim watched him intently and asked in a detached tone, “Why did you return Challe’s wing to him? You could have torn the wing up and erased him from existence without Anne ever knowing. If you had done that, she would have been left with no option but to rely on you. That probably would have been a better outcome for her as well.”

Hugh placed the cup back on the table and grinned unexpectedly.

“I did consider that. But I got the feeling that it might break something inside Anne. I was afraid of that happening.”

The typically straight-faced Salim appeared surprised for once.

“Hey, hey, what’s this? What’s with that look? Was what I said really so horrifying?” he asked, smiling slightly.

“Yes,” Salim replied. “That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you use the word *afraid*.”

Chapter 1

A POOR HARVEST OF SUGAR APPLES

“Hey, hey, listen, Challe Fenn Challe. Do you like it best when a girl has her hair done up neatly? Or do you prefer it when she lets it down?”

Mithril Lid Pod, a fairy born from a drop of lake water, looked up intently with his blue eyes and asked the question with a serious expression.

Challe Fenn Challe looked annoyed. He cast a sidelong glance at Mithril, but then he immediately averted his gaze.

They rode on an old boxy wagon, its paint peeling. Anne sat in the driver’s seat, handling the horse. She was growing anxious. She wondered when Challe would lose his temper at the barrage of questions from Mithril, who was seated between her and Challe on the narrow driver’s bench.

In his hand, the water sprite was holding a quill pen that Anne had given him. The pen, made for human use, was much too large for Mithril. He supported it on one shoulder and was the epitome of seriousness.

At his feet was a piece of paper that he had also gotten from Anne. On it, she could see many itemized entries written in squiggly letters, as if earthworms had crawled across the page. It looked like Mithril intended to record Challe’s answers in the blank spaces under those entries.

In the approximate hour since the questioning had begun, Challe had not spoken a single word in reply.

“Hey, Challe Fenn Challe!” Mithril raised his voice, losing patience. “How many questions do you think I’ve asked you so far? At least answer one!”

Challe kept his eyes averted. He rested his chin in his hand atop his propped-up knee and gazed at the cityscape of the royal capital, Lewiston, which he was visiting for the first time in three months.

Mithril stood indignantly. He planted the tip of the quill pen that he had been holding over his shoulder into the driver's seat with a *thunk*.

"Challe Fenn Challe! I'll take anything, so just say something!"

When Mithril said that, Challe finally answered him with a single word.

"Shush."

"Whaaat?! Listen you, I said anything was fine as long as you said something, but that's obviously not what I meant!! Give me a real answer!"

"I have no obligation to give serious answers to such ridiculous questions."

"What's ridiculous about them?!"

"If you have any that aren't, let me know."

"They're all extremely important questions! Answer everything!"

Challe's gaze grew even colder.

"I'll throw you into a barrel."

"H-hey! Isn't this the first time the two of you have been to Lewiston in three months?! That's exciting! Should we drop in at the Weather Vane?" Anne asked with forced cheer in her voice, smiling at the two of them. "It's gotten cold recently, so some mulled wine would really hit the spot! Right, Mithril Lid Pod? That was your favorite, huh?!"

Mithril looked up at her and burst into an enthusiastic smile. The one small wing on his back stretched out tautly.

"Mulled wine! That's a great idea!"

"Isn't it? Let's go drink some!"

"Yay!"

Mithril seemed completely enthralled by the promise of mulled wine. He shoved the quill pen and paper behind him, then looked at the broad road

stretching out ahead of them with a grin on his face.

With the royal castle in the center, Lewiston was a city brimming with energy as people came and went.

“We should be at the West Marketplace before long. Once we get on that road, the Weather Vane isn’t far. I can still remember the smell of that wine. It has a wonderful aroma, doesn’t it?”

Mithril was in a good mood now as he pointed to the road that had a miller’s shop on the corner.

In wintertime, a staple drink is mulled wine with plenty of spices in it. People add sugar and lemon juice to taste just before drinking it so they can enjoy the combination of sweet and tart.

Fairies can’t taste anything but silver sugar. Mithril, therefore, had no way of actually appreciating the flavor, but he seemed to like the aroma of the spices.

Moreover, mulled wine is alcoholic. Even fairies can get drunk, and the noisy Mithril got even more boisterous when tipsy.

A chilly breeze brushed Anne’s cheek. She looked up at the autumn sky.

This year for sure. I want to make a sugar candy sculpture fit for a festival and enter the Royal Candy Fair again.

When Anne inhaled the autumn air of Lewiston, vivid memories of the year before came rushing back to her.

Anne had been able to spend the end of last year in Lewiston at an inn called the Weather Vane, carefully crafting a piece of candy for Pure Soul Day. On Pure Soul Day, she sent her mother Emma’s soul off to heaven with peaceful wishes.

Anne had stayed at the inn through the new year and spent the rest of the winter there.

Once the weather had warmed, she traveled to the southeastern part of the kingdom to sell her sugar candies.

There had been a respectable demand for her work. Rumors of Anne Halford, the young candy crafter who had satisfied the eccentric former Duke of Philax

with her candy sculpture, had spread throughout the kingdom's southeastern region.

Anne had a perfectly pleasant spring and summer.

And then autumn came again.

It was the season when she had first met Challe and Mithril a year earlier.

As the wind blew down the avenue, dry leaves skipped across the paving stones. They formed small drifts in the doorways of the shops along the road.

I want to become a Silver Sugar Master.

It was the next step in her life's journey.

Anne needed to focus on the Royal Candy Fair, which was only a month away.

She had yet to decide what kind of sculpture she would create; she had been vaguely thinking that she could make something using Challe as a model.

But she wasn't stressed about it. There was still a month to go. She could harvest her sugar apples and work on perfecting her design as she refined the fruit into silver sugar. Luckily, she had the money she'd received from the former Duke of Philax, so she could forget about selling candy for the month and devote herself fully to making her candy sculpture.

"Oh right, Anne, if we're going to the Weather Vane, I'll go get your wallet from the cargo hold."

Mithril cheerfully climbed up onto the roof of the cargo hold and slipped in through one of the small windows on the side.

After watching him go, Challe asked, sounding deeply annoyed, "What is Mithril Lid Pod trying to get at with those questions?"

"Wh-who knows? I wonder what he's up to...," Anne replied without looking at Challe.

He turned his sharp gaze toward her.

"Do you know why he is doing that?" he demanded.

"Umm. I might know...or I might not..."

“If you know why he’s doing it, then shut him up. Nothing could possibly be more annoying.”

“I’ll try...”

Ever since the end of the previous year, Mithril had taken every opportunity to repeatedly ask Challe strings of odd questions.

Mithril was persistent.

For nine months, he had been sporadically bombarding Challe with questions, though he never answered him.

In truth, Mithril’s actions were a part of his grand plan to repay his debt to Anne.

Nine months earlier, he had announced to her secretly, but with great pride, *“I, the great Mithril Lid Pod, will bring your love to fruition, Anne! I’m not thrilled the object of your affection is Challe Fenn Challe, but...nevertheless! I consider it my obligation to make sure that you are happy, Anne!”* He’d been very enthusiastic about setting her up.

The purpose of those questions was to discover Challe’s tastes. Mithril was apparently conducting research so that he could help Anne get closer to being the kind of girl Challe liked.

Anne was happy that Mithril wanted to help. But he was being unbelievably bothersome.

If Challe realized the reason behind Mithril’s interrogations, he would discover her feelings for him. If that happened, she would be so embarrassed, she could die.

In the coming days, Anne needed to harvest sugar apples and refine them into silver sugar for the candy fair. Then she had to create her entry for the contest.

Since it was such an important time, she was irked by Mithril’s scheme for some grand repayment that she didn’t even need.

Certainly, there were tons of things she wanted to ask Challe, including what color of dresses he liked and whether he preferred girls to wear their hair up or down.

But that didn't come from some wild desire to attract his attention.

For the moment, Anne was content just to have him sitting by her side.

However, she did want to make a favorable impression on the person she liked. She couldn't help feeling that way, as any young girl would.

I don't care if he likes me back, or if I can be his lover, or anything. But if Challe says he likes girls better with their hair down, then I'm definitely going to want to try doing that. I'm sure of it.

Anne was entertaining such thoughts against her better judgment.

With a weary gesture, Challe softly pushed his bangs back. The hair fell back down again and brushed against his eyelashes.

Born from a piece of obsidian, the fairy had a bewitching allure to him, just like the rock from which he had sprung.

His one wing, cascading smoothly over the driver's bench, was glossy as silk. Anne wanted very much to touch it.

Gazing absentmindedly at Challe's beautiful profile, Anne turned the corner at the flour shop.

That's when it happened.

She bumped into another wagon coming out of an alleyway.

"Ah!"

Anne pulled on the reins in a panic and brought her horse to a halt. The wagon coming toward her also made a sudden, surprised stop. Anne breathed a sigh of relief that they had narrowly avoided a full-on crash.

"Keep yer eyes on the road while yer drivin', ya idiot!!" the driver of the carriage in front of her yelled.

"I'm so sorry! I was spacing out!"

Anne immediately apologized, because she knew she was completely in the wrong for letting her mind wander.

But there were no further shouts of abuse. Far from it.

“You all... Could it be...?” the driver who had shouted at Anne mumbled in surprise.

She recognized the voice and lifted her head. And then—

“Ah!”

Without really meaning to, she pointed at the man.

“What’s the matter, Anne?!” Mithril asked, poking his face out of the window of the cargo hold. He must have been startled by the sudden stop. But once he recognized the wagon in front of them and the person driving it, he shouted, “Ah, ahhh—?!”

In their shock, Anne and Mithril were at a loss for words.

Challe spoke for them.

“Why is a cat that can’t stand the cold prowling around Lewiston in the autumn? Are you preparing for hibernation?”

Sitting on the driver’s seat of the carriage they had bumped into was a young man with a bewildered expression.

The young man had a slender build and grayish hair. His deep-blue eyes turned up at the corners. He was looking at Challe. His face, which gave a cold expression, had a sort of aristocratic elegance to it. He invoked an image of a cat with glossy, silver-gray fur and a graceful, long tail.

Atop the young man’s shoulder sat a fairy who was about the same size as Mithril and looked like a little boy. He had fluffy, light-green ringlets and slightly flushed cheeks. He wore a sweet, effeminate smile.

Both of their faces were familiar.

“Mr. Kat?! And Benjamin, too?!”

Finally, Anne shouted the names of the two in front of her.

When she did, the young man—Kat—also seemed to snap out of his thoughts and raised his thin eyebrows.

“Did you forget that I told ya not to put *mister* in front of my name?! You scatterbrain!!”

The lowbrow insult seemed at odds with his noble appearance.

“Ah, s-sorry!”

“And, Challe, ya jerk—how dare you call me a cat! Cats don’t even hibernate!”

The young man before them was Alph Hingley.

Kat was his nickname.

He was a Silver Sugar Master. He did his work without being a part of any faction, but his skills were said to rival those of Hugh Mercury, the Silver Sugar Viscount.

The one sitting on his shoulder was Benjamin, the worker fairy whom Kat owned.

Anne had happened to make Kat’s acquaintance following the previous year’s Royal Candy Fair, after he set up shop in Lewiston. She spent four days helping him with his work.

He had shown her how to work so that she could garner respect as a candy crafter. On top of that, he also gave her a cape that was quite good at keeping out the cold, as compensation for her assistance. It helped her make it through the winter.

She had been very grateful to him and hoped they would meet again. But they’d never gotten the chance, because Kat had supposedly moved to a town in the south the previous winter.

“I see you again after a whole year, and this is how you people greet me?!”

On top of Kat’s shoulder, Benjamin laughed buoyantly. “Nice to see youuu, Anne and Challe. And you seem well, Surusuru!”

Mithril raised his fist overhead.

“My. Name. Is. Mith. Ril! Mithril Lid Pod!”

Challe ignored Kat’s shouting. “Why don’t you go curl up in a warm spot somewhere, like a good kitty?” he said calmly.

“I see you’ve still got a foul mouth... Anne, can’t ya do something about him?”

Under Kat’s reproachful glare, Anne tugged at Challe’s sleeve.

“Challe. I know you find it amusing to make Kat angry, but—”

“You think this is funny, ya bastard?! Bring it on! Challe, get down from that wagon!”

“I’m sorry, Kat! Challe didn’t mean to offend...! ...? Not really...I think...?”

“So he did mean it after all?!”

Anne got even more flustered as Kat grew more furious. He seemed ready to leap out of his carriage at any moment.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!! But, Kat! Really, why are you in Lewiston?! Are you here on some sort of business?!”

She frantically strung together some words to try changing the subject.

“There’s only one reason why I’d come to Lewiston at this time of year!” Kat snapped. “What’re you playin’ at?! If I didn’t come now, I wouldn’t be able to do business next year.”

“Huh? Why is that?”

Kat frowned at Anne, who blinked back at him uncomprehendingly.

“Don’t tell me, you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

She had absolutely no idea what he was getting at.

Benjamin looked up at Kat anxiously when he saw her looking puzzled.

With a sigh, Kat grumbled, “Unbelievable. Every last one of ’em. Petty and cowardly.”

From the way he was talking, Anne could tell it was nothing good.

“What’s going on, Kat? Did something happen?”

“Here’s no good. There’s a nice bar called the Weather Vane farther down this alley. Come with me.”

Kat adjusted his grip on his horse’s reins.

The Weather Vane was a familiar spot to the people who lived on the western edge of Lewiston.

Anne was a regular at this tavern known for its cheap prices, cleanliness, and tasty fare.

Kat also apparently stopped there often to drink when he was in the capital.

When the proprietress saw Anne, appearing after a long absence, and Kat, an old regular, she welcomed them warmly.

Once they took their seats, Anne ordered three cups of the mulled wine that Mithril liked so much.

Kat ordered some strong liquor.

When the wine was brought over, Mithril embraced his cup lovingly.

“It smells so good! Hey, hey, Anne? Once I drink this one, can I get a refill?”

Mithril seemed overjoyed, so Anne chuckled and said, “Sure. You can have seconds.”

Challe, who had been stroking the rim of his cup with his finger, snapped, “You don’t have to let him drink. If you give him wine, he’ll get drunk and fall off the table again.”

Mithril glared sternly at him.

“Don’t remind me of such unpleasant things!”

“Had you forgotten? Well, it’s a good thing I reminded you, then. Remember it well.”

“Anne, don’t listen to a single word this guy says! And don’t remember anything you don’t have to!”

“No matter how empty her scarecrow head may be, I doubt she has forgotten.”

“No, I’m sure she had until you just said it! Don’t underestimate Anne’s scarecrow head!”

Anne slumped her shoulders as she listened to the fairies’ conversation.

“Everyone calls me a scatterbrain or a scarecrow head... I mean, I’m used to it, but...”

Kat's spirits were the last to be brought over. He drained the glass of fragrant, amber liquor in one swift gulp. Then he pushed it over to Benjamin, who was sitting on top of the table. Smiling happily, Benjamin held both hands out over the glass. Apparently, he was also drinking the same thing.

"Um, Kat? Did something happen?" Anne finally asked. "Something that I don't know about?"

"What've you been doing since last winter?"

Kat answered her with another inquiry.

Unable to deduce the real meaning behind his question, Anne replied, "I traveled all over selling sugar candies. After I split up with you, I went to Westol, then Philax, and then returned to the capital. From there, I went east to the small towns and villages in the Strand region, then traveled back and forth between there and Lewiston again."

"Did you look at the sugar apple trees on your way? Didn't you notice anything?"

Anne nodded right away. "The trees weren't blooming much no matter where I went. I think this year's crop is going to be a lot smaller than usual. That's why I want to secure my sugar apples early. I intend to go to a particular grove that I've had my eye on, so I came to Lewiston earlier than planned."

As he took the glass back from Benjamin, Kat said, "That's exactly right. Across the whole Kingdom of Highland, the crop of sugar apples this year is unbelievably bad. To the point that disputes will break out among the factions if they all try to harvest as they please like it's a normal year. And it wouldn't surprise me if crafters who don't belong to any of the three end up getting trampled by frantic mobs coming from those factions. Actually, I heard there were some incidents like that twenty years ago when there was a year with a bad sugar apple harvest."

"Is it going to be that awful this year? Throughout the kingdom?"

"Sure is. And that dim-witted bastard made arrangements to try to prevent chaos."

"Dim-witted...?"

“Hugh Mercury! Our dim-witted bastard of a Silver Sugar Viscount!”

Kat glared sternly at Anne with his sharp, feline eyes.

“Oh, I see. So that’s what happened.”

Anne nodded, her cheek twitching.

Long ago, Kat had apparently been a fellow trainee at the Mercury Workshop along with Hugh. It was Hugh who had given him the nickname *Kat*. And Kat seemed to resent him for that, considering how he kept calling the current Silver Sugar Viscount a “dim-witted bastard.”

“So then what kind of arrangements did he make?”

“He’s prohibited individuals from harvesting and refining sugar apples by themselves this year.”

At Kat’s response, Challe’s fingers, which had been stroking the rim of his cup, stopped.

Anne hadn’t yet grasped what Kat was talking about.

“Prohibited...? So how are candy crafters supposed to obtain silver sugar?”

“This year, all the sugar apples in the entire kingdom will be harvested and refined under the authority of the Silver Sugar Viscount. He will distribute the silver sugar to candy crafters in accordance with the amount of labor each crafter contributed to the process. These orders just went out to every candy crafter in the Kingdom of Highland, in the name of the Silver Sugar Viscount.”

“So that means we have to go to the Silver Sugar Viscount in order to get silver sugar?”

“It’s not that simple. The Viscount’s the one who made the decision, but it’s not like he’s running everything himself. The actual responsibility has been assigned to the Radcliffe Workshop.”

Challe frowned slightly when he heard the name of the Radcliffe Workshop.

Kat continued:

“Every studio in the kingdom belonging to that faction will harvest and collect the sugar apples in its vicinity, then refine them into silver sugar. Crafters from

other factions, and those who don't belong to one, are to assemble at those studios and assist with the refining work. We'll be allotted silver sugar based on our contribution. The main studio in Lewiston is the largest and has lots of sugar apple groves around it. I bet an awful lot of crafters are on their way there. I mean, I'm also heading there so I can get my silver sugar."

Anne was hearing everything for the first time. She was just beginning to comprehend the importance of what he was saying.

"So to put it simply, if we don't participate in helping refine silver sugar at one of the Radcliffe Workshop's studios, we won't be able to get any silver sugar this year... Is that what you're saying?"

"That's right."

"But I never heard anything about this."

"On instructions from that dim-witted bastard, those from the Radcliffe Workshop were supposed to go inform any unaffiliated candy crafters who lived nearby. Word came to my place, too. And because there are folk out there traveling like you, crafters should have searched and notified such people whenever they stopped by a town."

"But..."

Anne was baffled, but she heard Challe, who was sitting beside her, grumbling.

"We were deliberately not informed?" he asked.

When Anne turned to look at Challe, she saw that he was staring fixedly at Kat.

"Anne's been moving from town to town. And during that time, she's been told more than once to get out by candy crafters affiliated with the Radcliffe Workshop. And yet no one told her such important news. They never intended to tell her, right? That's the only conceivable explanation, isn't it?"

Kat scowled. "I mean, rumors of Anne Halford, who made the candy for the former Duke of Philax, even reached my ears. I wouldn't be surprised if certain people resented her for her fortune."

Anne had always known she wouldn't be welcomed by the local candy crafters in the towns and villages she visited.

But she'd thought it was simply a matter of territory, that they were irritated someone else was setting up shop on their turf. Apparently, their enmity ran deeper than that.

She could feel the weight of their hatred.

Mithril tried to soothe Anne. "They were all being selfish!"

"That was so meeean of them," Benjamin chimed in. "I can't believe it."

He sounded like he agreed with Mithril's indignation, but there wasn't a hint of agitation in his voice. Then Benjamin smiled pleasantly at Anne. "But you know, Anne, if you start now, surely, you'll have plenty of time? After all, Kat just arrived in Lewiston, and he plans to begin working today."

"Mm... I guess you're right," Anne replied, head hung low. "Thank you very much, Kat. You saved me some trouble by telling me."

"It's not anything ya need to thank me for."

"Oh, Kat? This means that the only silver sugar we can get this year comes from the communal reserves, right? So then what are the entrants in the Royal Candy Fair supposed to do?"

In order to enter the Royal Candy Fair, a crafter must bring one candy sculpture and three barrels of silver sugar that they themselves refined. Both their ability to make candy and high-quality silver sugar are tested.

This year, no crafter would be able to get their hands on any silver sugar besides the mass-produced type at the regional workshops. That meant the contestants would be unable to prepare their own silver sugar.

Anne wondered what she should do.

It was a serious issue for her, since she planned to participate in the Royal Candy Fair again that year.

"They never told you that, either, of course." Kat ruffled his bangs in irritation. "The people who want to enter the candy fair are to temporarily take up lodging at the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop. There, the hopefuls will

be allotted only enough sugar apples to make four barrels' worth of silver sugar. And they'll refine that on their own. Then using the final product, they'll make their sculptures. That's the arrangement. But it comes with the condition that they do their work while also helping with refining the communal silver sugar. The only time they can make their candy piece is in the middle of the night. Otherwise, they won't have any other chance to do it. That's why everybody who was planning to enter the Royal Candy Fair was supposed to have gone to the main studio over half a month ago."

"The Radcliffe Workshop again, huh?"

Anne furrowed her brow.

To enter the Royal Candy Fair, Anne would have to stay there, where she would be allotted a very limited supply of sugar apples.

However, the Radcliffe Workshop was the faction to which Jonas belonged. What's more, she had been harassed before by other young men affiliated with that faction.

It wasn't a place she wanted to spend a lot of time at. Frankly, she didn't want to go at all.

But I have to.

She couldn't run away from an opportunity just because she hated the idea of going or thought it didn't sound fun.

"I guess I can't avoid this. How about it...? Could I get the two of you to come with me? Sounds like we might have a rough time, though."

"Anne, if you're going, I'm going with you, even to the depths of hell!" Mithril stood and answered immediately.

Challe did, too, with a more composed expression. "I'll go with you. Nothing good can come of leaving idiots to their own devices," he said rudely.

Relieved, Anne turned back to Kat.

"I'm going to the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop."

"You know where it is?"

“I only know that it’s in Lewiston. I’m sure I can find it quickly.”

Kat downed another glass of his strong liquor and rose to his feet. “No need for all that. I’m going there now, too. I’ll show ya the way. Come with me. But that’s all. Don’t expect too much. If yer a real crafter, and if something happens, you get through it yerself.”

“Okay.”

Anne nodded, ready for whatever came next.

Challe stood and jerked his chin in Kat’s direction. “Well then, I suppose we’ll have you show us the way, Mr. Kat.”

Kat narrowed his eyes and thrust his finger right in front of Challe’s nose. “Are you just as much of a scatterbrain as this little shrimp?! No, I bet you said it on purpose! Anyway, don’t add *mister* to someone’s nickname! ‘Mr. Kat’! I feel like yer makin’ fun of me—it makes me sick!”

“Is that so? My apologies.”

Even though his expression was blank, Challe apologized quickly.

Kat lowered the finger he’d thrust at the fairy.

“Oh...? ...A-ah, well. Don’t worry about it.”

Challe looked at Kat’s dumbfounded face and flashed a grin.

“Let’s go. Mr. Kat.”

“Wh-why you—!! You really are making fun of me—!”

Chapter 2

RADCLIFFE WORKSHOP

Anne's boxy wagon followed closely behind Kat's.

As they headed south along the main road, they came across one of the broad streets that circled the royal castle. They turned onto that street and drove their wagons toward the west side of the city.

After traveling that way for a while, they arrived at some buildings that were four or five times larger than the merchant houses that crowded together in the areas near the markets.

Every one of them had an imposing gabled roof.

There were hardly any single-story buildings. Most of them were at least two stories tall. If the attic rooms with small windows were included, the taller ones were four-story red brick constructions.

These were the shops of woolen fabric wholesalers, or traders who handled goods imported from abroad—specifically, warehouse storefronts capable of holding large quantities of goods. They appeared to be in a part of town where wealthy merchants built their stores.

Anne and Kat turned a corner, and a dark reddish-brown brick wall suddenly appeared, running parallel to the road. The wall continued into the distance. Anne peered ahead and saw what looked like a gate to the premises, still a ways off.

Two or three carriages were parked in front of the gate.

What could this structure be?

Anne gazed at the brick wall, her curiosity rising. Leafy branches of deciduous trees poked over the top of the wall. Beyond those branches, she could see several gabled roofs of various sizes.

Quite a few buildings stood close together on the other side.

When they got closer to the gate, Kat stopped his wagon.

Anne pulled up alongside him.

“We’ll reach the gate of the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop soon.”

Again, Anne looked up at the red brick wall that was right beside her.

“So on the other side of this wall that seems to go on forever is the head house of the Radcliffe Workshop? ...Incredible. It’s...huge.”

There are three main factions of candy crafters.

The Mercury Workshop.

The Paige Workshop.

And the Radcliffe Workshop.

Studios affiliated with each faction are scattered throughout the whole kingdom. Each branch operates with permission from the faction’s maestro. The main studio, sometimes called the head house, is personally run by the maestro. It employs several Silver Sugar Masters and a few dozen apprentices, who do everything from harvesting sugar apples and refining them into silver sugar to creating candy sculptures.

Kat moved his wagon forward again, and Anne followed.

The gate to the premises had double doors made of wrought iron.

And they were standing open.

Just past it was a large, two-story building with an extremely slanted red gable roof.

Near the gate were three people who appeared to be candy crafters affiliated with the Radcliffe Workshop.

They were asking the incoming candy crafters for their names, then directing

them to a small table set up off to the side, where they had to sign some papers before they were allowed inside.

Kat and Anne both alighted from their wagons. Pulling his horse by the bridle, Kat entered through the gate first.

“Hey. I’m here to join in the work. Lemme through.”

As soon as he passed through, Kat called out to a blond young man nearby.

“Ah yes. Umm, your name is...?”

The man turned around and looked startled.

“Oh...Anne?” he mumbled.

He gazed past Kat and noticed Anne, who was standing behind him.

She let out a small sigh as soon as she saw him. She knew him all too well.

“Jonas... Of course you would be here, but...”

He was certainly not someone she wanted to reunite with any time soon.

“Hey, Jonas! What’re you spacing out for?!” someone yelled from behind him.

This person seemed to be the oldest one there, a man in his midtwenties. He had a conspicuously large nose and came across as dull-witted. But his unassuming brown eyes moved shrewdly, flicking back and forth between Kat and Jonas.

“Jonas, it’s rude to make them wait, you know!” he said, clapping his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

Jonas looked startled, but he returned his gaze to Kat, who was standing in front of him.

“Ah, sorry. I’ll take your name.”

“It’s fine, no need. I’ll show him in.” The young man pushed Jonas aside and stepped in front of him. “My apologies, I’m Sammy Jones, reception manager. Mr. Alph Hingley, the Silver Sugar Master, is it? I know who you are! This guy doesn’t know anything; sorry he was so rude. I’ll show you right inside, if I could just get you to sign the paperwork,” he said, urging Kat toward the table.

On the other side of the table sat a composed young man who skillfully readied the documents. His looks were striking: light-brown hair and eyes of such a deep blue that they appeared purple. Everything about him, from his knee-length jacket to his soft-looking necktie, was genteel and refined.

Anne felt she had seen that face somewhere before.

“Welcome, Mr. Hingley. It’s been too long. First of all, please sign here.”

The young man behind the table smiled and held out a quill pen.

“You came too, Powell?” Kat sounded surprised.

“Not exactly. I belong to the Radcliffe Workshop now.”

“Why? Isn’t yer old man part of the Paige Workshop?”

“My father is my father. And I am me. I don’t like being compared to him, so here I am.”

Kat snorted and took the pen.

Sammy stood by Kat’s side and said with a grin, “You’re really helping us out by coming here, Mr. Hingley. I’ll show you to your room.”

Kat leaned over the table, and as he was signing, he said, “Don’t you worry about me. If you tell me where it is, I’m sure I can find my room on my own. More importantly, there’s someone else behind me. Go tend to her.”

Sammy finally looked in Anne’s direction. His smile disappeared, like a mask had fallen from his face.

He approached Anne, who was still holding her horse by the bridle, and looked her up and down.

Jonas was frozen on the spot. He appeared as if he didn’t know what he should be doing. He twisted his body a little to let Sammy pass, then glanced back and forth between Anne and Sammy.

“What do you want?” Sammy asked brusquely.

“I also came to participate in the work of refining the silver sugar. And I intend to enter the Royal Candy Fair as well.”

“Huh? A girl?”

Anne bristled at his mocking voice and attitude, but she answered calmly.

“I may be a girl, but I am a candy crafter.”

“I guess some studio heads will take women as apprentices, huh? And you do occasionally come across those self-proclaimed candy crafters who can hardly sculpt a thing. But we don’t let those types into our studio!”

“I am a candy crafter. My skills have been formally recognized.”

“By who? Your mommy or someone?”

“By the former Duke of Philax.”

When he heard that, the young man standing behind the table looked up. Then— “Mr. Hingley, excuse me for a moment,” he said quietly before leaving the desk and walking slowly over to Anne. “Are you...Anne Halford?”

Sammy scowled. His eyes shone with much greater malice than earlier. Then he looked up at the driver’s bench of the boxy wagon that was parked behind Anne.

“Well, I don’t care who you are,” he said. “I can’t let you inside.”

“Why not?!”

“You’ve got a pet fairy with you, don’t you? It’s the rule that only humans and worker fairies that are involved in the work are allowed into the studio. The little one over there may be a worker fairy, but this pretty one must be a pet. If you want to work at our studio, first go sell that fairy.”

“No way...”

“It’s the rules.”

Anne bit her lip and frowned.

She knew it would probably be best to withdraw for the time being and return after carefully collecting her thoughts. It annoyed her to be driven away, but she knew she couldn’t make a good decision on the spur of the moment.

Kat had finished signing and was leaning against the table, intently watching their exchange.

“Now get going! Wash your face and come back again later!” Sammy hollered

with obvious relish.

“Wait a minute, Sammy.”

The young man with light-brown hair placed his hand softly on Sammy’s shoulder.

“What is it?”

“She’s all right.” The young man turned to Anne and gave her a gentlemanly smile. “So it is you. I don’t suppose you remember me? It was quite a while ago, and we only met briefly at the Weather Vane when my colleagues said some rude things. I’m sorry about what happened back then.”

At that point, Anne finally remembered.

“Ah, you’re that guy—”

“Keith Powell. Nice to meet you.” He held his hand out for a handshake without hesitation.

Flustered, Anne gripped his hand. “Uh, nice to meet you, too. I’m Anne Halford.”

Nine months earlier, with the money she had just received from the former Duke of Philax, Anne had gone to the Weather Vane to spend the winter. When she got there, she had received some snide comments from some workers belonging to the Radcliffe Workshop.

The young man before her eyes was the one who had admonished them.

The other men had called him Keith, and she remembered he had commanded their respect.

Sammy walked straight up to Keith’s side.

“Keith. Send her away. She’s brought a pet fairy with her. If she doesn’t sell it off or leave it with someone, she can’t come inside. We’ve got rules, you know?”

“A pet fairy? If I remember correctly, you had this fairy with you at the Weather Vane, too, didn’t you?”

Keith’s gaze shifted to Challe, who was sitting in the driver’s seat of the

wagon. And then— “He is...beautiful...,” Keith murmured in spite of himself. “Last time, the room was rather dim. I only got a glimpse of him, so I couldn’t really tell, but seeing him in a bright place like this, he’s incredible... I’ve never seen such a beautiful fairy.”

Keith sounded like he was bewitched. He stared at Challe for a full minute. He didn’t seem distracted exactly, but more like he was turning some thoughts over in his mind.

Challe, meanwhile, was used to the attention. He averted his eyes, as if to say, *Look all you like*.

Keith slowly turned his gaze back to Anne. “Say, Anne. Are you hesitating because you don’t want to let go of this fairy?”

“He’s a dear friend of mine who’s been traveling with me. I don’t own him or put him to work. But he’s my friend, so I don’t want to leave him, that’s all.”

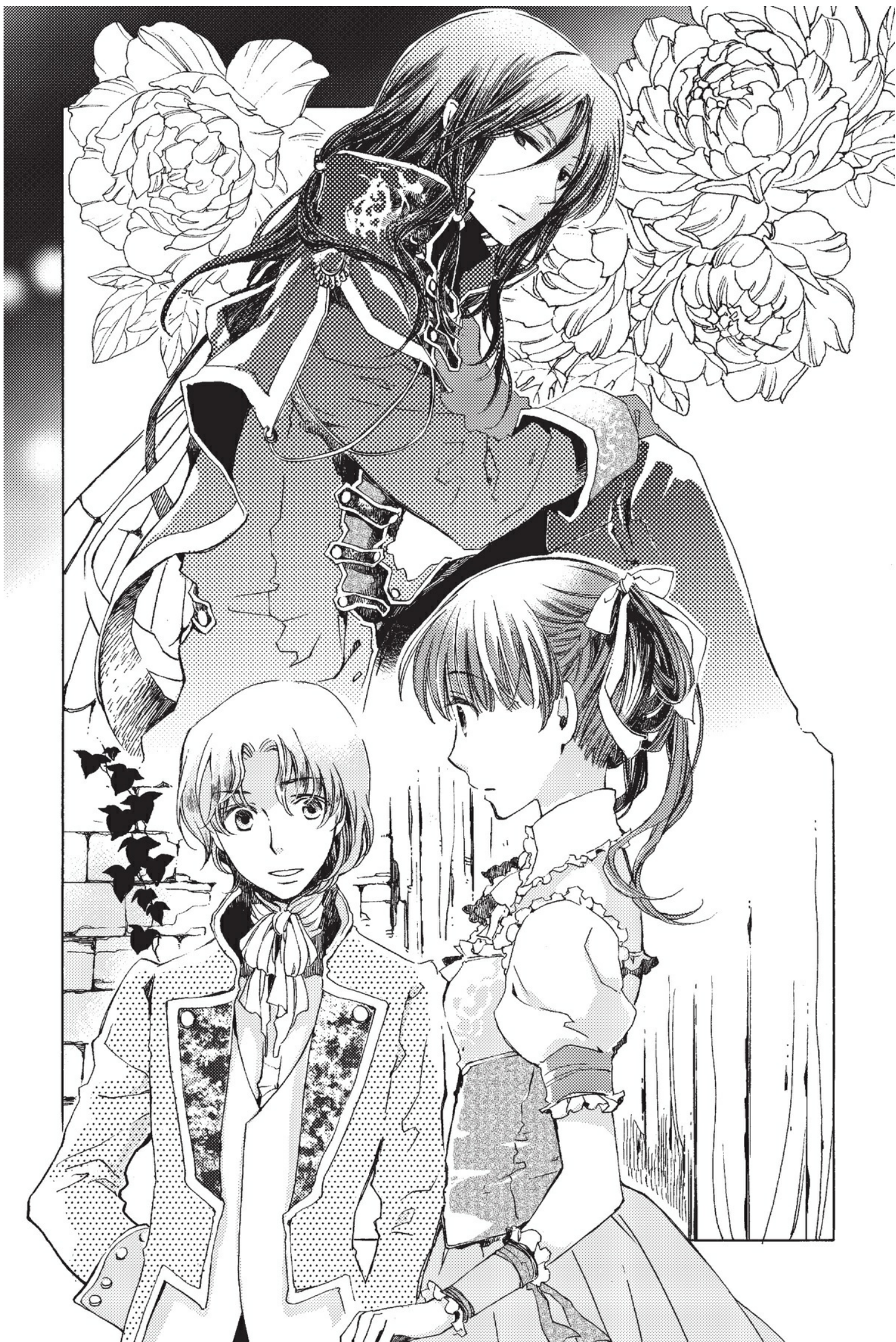
“Oh? He doesn’t work for you? In that case, there is a way he can come into the studio. I can get him in.”

“Really?”

“I’m planning to enter the Royal Candy Fair this year. I want to use him as a model for my entry piece. So I would like to borrow him from time to time when I need to. If you’ll consent to that, I can let you bring him in.”

“Model?!”

“If I say I’m using him as my model, he becomes someone who’s necessary for the production of my work. Then he can enter the studio. I don’t think something like this would go well if it came from you, since you’re a newcomer, but I have a lot of pull within the studio, you see?”



The question was whether he could borrow the fairy. Anne felt repulsed by the way he spoke, as if Challe was an object.

Challe was not Anne's possession. She didn't want to treat him like one.

Moreover, it didn't seem likely that he would agree to such a thing.

"I'm sorry. That's..."

Anne was about to decline, when Challe tugged suddenly at her arm from behind her.

When she twisted her neck around to look up at him, he announced, with a calm look on his face, "Very well. She'll sign. Give us the paperwork."

"Challe?! Why?! You actually intend to be his model?!"

"I can do that much."

The corners of Challe's mouth turned up into a slight smirk.

These humans thought it was only natural that they should make fairies work for them. He had a way of mocking them even as he acceded to their demands.

From his cold expression, Anne could sense his confidence and his contempt.

"Sign the paper. Or do you want to be separated?"

"Uh-uh, but—"

She was conflicted. She hated the idea of placing such a burden on Challe.

"Sign the paper."

Challe pushed her gently in Keith's direction, and she stumbled forward. She turned back to look at Challe once more. He was scowling at her, as if to say, *Hurry up and do it*. With his support, Anne made up her mind.

"Keith. Challe has agreed to serve as your model, so I'm going to sign the papers. Please let me take part in refining the silver sugar."

"Wonderful. Well then, your signature please, right here."

Keith guided Anne over to the table. Kat cleared the way.

As Anne filled out the documentation, she heard Sammy grumbling behind

her. “Jonas, go talk to Marcus about this. Ask him whether we should really let this girl in.”

“I don’t think it’ll do any good,” Jonas replied. “The old man’s more likely to listen to Keith’s opinion than to the likes of me.”

“You’re useless, Jonas. Hey, Keith!”

When Sammy called his name, Keith looked up.

“What?”

“Why do we have to let someone like her in?!”

“If the issue of the pet fairy is resolved, then there’s no reason to reject her, is there? Or do you have some other argument to make, Sammy?”

Keith’s cheerful smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“N-no...”

Sammy finally got the message and shut up.

Anne looked up at Keith again.

Who is this guy?

“Um, ribbon. Ribbon!”

Anne looked restlessly around while she diligently braided her hair.

“There it is. Okay, there we go. Sorry, Mithril Lid Pod.”

She’d almost sent Mithril flying with her arm. He was dozing on the bed, nodding off at a staccato rhythm.

Anne apologized in a fluster, but Mithril didn’t even open his eyes.

While she was focused on him, her braided hair unraveled.

“Oh, come on!”

Daybreak had not yet come.

It was the day after she had taken up lodgings at the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop.

Challe was looking outside through the window. Below it stretched the slim branches of a tree covered in broad, dry leaves. The layout of the grounds was clearly visible from their second-story room.

Nine buildings of various sizes made up the campus of the Radcliffe Workshop's main studio.

The faction's maestro, Marcus Radcliffe, and his family lived in the two-story building across from the gate where he received guests and conducted business negotiations. This was known as the main house.

Behind it was a large, long, single-story building where the sugar candy was produced.

The next bungalow behind that one was where the work of refining silver sugar took place.

Three two-story red brick buildings served as dormitories where the crafters lived. There was also one stable and two warehouses.

Anne and the fairies had been assigned a room in one of those dorms.

Ordinary crafters slept in a large common room with rows of beds. Private rooms in the dorms were limited to either Silver Sugar Masters or those who the maestro deemed as possessing an equivalent level of skill.

Anne should have been put up in the common quarters, but there was no way she could sleep there with all the men. So through special arrangements, she had been granted a private room.

Anne had leaped out of bed the moment she opened her eyes. She changed her clothes and washed her face, then hastily braided her hair.

"You look like a little baby squirrel," Challe said with astonishment as he watched her.

"A squirrel? So that means I look way cuter than a scarecrow?!"

For a moment, Anne was happy and burst into a smile.

"You look just like them, the way they run around frantically, hunting for food."

“...I should have known. So that’s what you meant.”

Anne glumly finished tying her hair. Then she peered somberly into her hand mirror.

My hair. I wonder if I look immature because of the braids? Maybe I would look more grown-up if I left it down? I wonder which one Challe prefers.

She was staring intensely into the mirror, thinking, when she heard Challe’s voice from behind her.

“Are you trying to break the mirror with your mind?”

Without her noticing, he had moved from his position by the window to stand right behind her.

Anne got embarrassed and turned the mirror facedown onto the bed.

“I—I was just looking to see if my hair was done right.”

“It looks the same as always. No problem.”

Then Challe touched Anne’s braided hair casually. She jumped and turned around.

Even in the dim light, his black eyes were enchanting. Anne couldn’t help being drawn in by his gaze.

“Hey, Challe...? Do you like it better when my hair is up, or...?”

She suddenly blurted out the question, talking as if in a delirium.

“Your hair?” Challe asked with a puzzled look.

Anne clapped a hand over her mouth.

“I-I’m just as bad as Mithril Lid Pod!”

“What?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it! Wake up, Mithril Lid Pod. Let’s go to work.”

Anne shook Mithril awake, and he crawled sluggishly up onto her shoulder, yawning all the while.

“You can take your time, Challe,” said Anne. “Though, we don’t know when Keith is going to come summon you, so you probably can’t relax. Sorry about

that.”

“I thought I told you; I don’t mind.”

“Yes, thank you. Okay! From today on, I’ve got to give it my all!”

The night before, Anne had been racked with anxiety from being in an unfamiliar place, and she had hardly slept one bit. To lift her spirits, she waved good-bye with a cheerful smile.

“Okay, we’re off!”

Anne left the room with Mithril to start helping with the work of refining silver sugar.

As she was walking quickly down the hallway, one of the doors along the corridor opened.

“Anne. Good morning.”

Keith poked his face out of the open door. His room was diagonally across from Anne’s. Out of the three dormitories, the second floor of their building was exclusively private rooms.

There were only four people currently occupying those spaces.

There was Kat, and Anne. And Elliott Collins, the proxy maestro who had come from the main studio of the Paige Workshop to help with the work. And Keith Powell.

Elliott Collins was a Silver Sugar Master. He was also the representative for his faction, so it was only natural that he got a private room. Kat was also a Silver Sugar Master.

Keith Powell was not, yet he was using a private room. He must have garnered a lot of respect within the Radcliffe Workshop.

However, it couldn’t simply be that he was a talented crafter. No matter how impressive his skills, there would be backlash from the other members of the workshop if he received special treatment. Perhaps there was some unusual circumstance that explained his accommodations. Either that, or a reason why there would be no backlash to begin with.

“Good morning, Keith. Are you heading down to work now, too?” Anne asked.

He shook his head lightly. “I’m off duty today. We take turns getting breaks once a week. Of course, you’ll get one, too. Normally, I can’t take this much time off all at once, so I’ve got to use it effectively. I’d like to borrow Challe; is that all right?”

“Keith, I can’t lend Challe out or let you borrow him. He’ll do what he agreed to do, but...”

“Oh, right. You did say that you’re not in charge of him, didn’t you? I’m sorry; that was a nasty way to put it.”

Anne found his honest apology very likable.

“No, it’s fine. More importantly, Keith, thank you for yesterday. You stuck up for me so that I could come here. You really helped me out. But why are you being so nice to me when the others aren’t at all?”

“I mean, you’re a real crafter, aren’t you? Recognized by the former Duke of Philax, even. There’s no reason for me to be mean to you. Besides, how do I put this? I feel like your circumstances in life might be similar to mine?”

“My circumstances?”

“Your mother was Emma Halford, is that right?”

“Yes, but why do you know that?”

Anne was amazed to hear a near stranger mention her mother by name.

“When I heard rumors of you in connection with the former Duke of Philax, I thought maybe you might be related to Ms. Halford, and I asked the Silver Sugar Viscount about you. When I did, he told me it was true.”

“You asked the Silver Sugar Viscount directly? Now that you mention it, you did seem to know Kat as well.”

“Until the year before last, I was acquainted with almost all the Silver Sugar Masters. Ms. Halford especially left an impression on me. Though, I was only four or five years old when I met her. I was surprised to learn that there were female Silver Sugar Masters.”

“You met her? You met Mama...?”

This person knew Emma. When she thought about that, Anne felt a surge of nostalgic affection.

Keith looked at Anne with his usual gentle smile. “My father was Edward Powell. Like your mother, he was a Silver Sugar Master. There’s a similarity, right? Between my circumstances and yours.”

Anne was left momentarily breathless.

“...The former Silver Sugar Viscount, Edward Powell?!”

“That’s right,” Keith answered casually.

“Mama told me he was a splendid Silver Sugar Viscount. His term in office lasted over twenty years. If I remember correctly, he passed away from an illness about six months before Mama died. They may have both been Silver Sugar Masters, but that’s a whole different level!”

“Really? But I’m not quite sure he was so splendid. While my father was the Silver Sugar Viscount, there was a year just like this one, when there was a bad harvest of sugar apples. I’ve heard there was terrible mayhem because of it. That was the year before I was born, though, so I can’t really say for certain. Father was upset by what happened. This time, the Silver Sugar Viscount took my father’s failure into account and adopted early preventative measures, so everything’s proceeding in an orderly fashion.”

He wasn’t bragging, but he wasn’t being humble, either. Keith wasn’t acting vain in the slightest as he simply stated the honest truth.

The family of the Silver Sugar Viscount are treated like nobility for the duration of the Viscount’s tenure.

Keith’s aristocratic deportment probably came from his living as a noble for most of his life.

But once the Silver Sugar Viscount is discharged from his post or passes away, his family reverts to their commoner status. Anne had heard that many people came away with a warped way of thinking due to the difference in class, although she didn’t see any evidence of that in Keith.

“But the former Silver Sugar Viscount came out of the Paige Workshop, didn’t he? Why are you at the Radcliffe Workshop, Keith?”

“If I entered the Paige Workshop, I’d be sure to receive special treatment as Powell’s son, right? My father was the first Silver Sugar Viscount ever produced from that faction, after all. I didn’t want that. I thought that if I came here, I might be treated as just another worker. But I don’t think it really changed anything? And it seemed childish to stubbornly insist I didn’t want any special treatment, so I’m just letting it happen.”

Keith shrugged playfully.

He’s the son of the former Silver Sugar Viscount. That explains it.

Ultimately, everyone around him saw his father when they looked at him.

That was the reason why the other candy crafters acted a little reserved toward Keith, and it also explained—along with his talents—why he had been given a private room.

“I respected my father, but I was uncomfortably constrained while he was in office. So now, as much as possible, I don’t want him influencing my life. You know, while my father was alive, I couldn’t enter the Royal Candy Fair, even though I wanted to.”

“Why not?”

“Well, if I won the royal medal, I’m sure the gossip would never end. People would have said I was in the royal family’s favor because I was the son of the Silver Sugar Viscount. On the other hand, if I hadn’t won the medal, they’d talk about me losing despite being the son of the Silver Sugar Viscount. For the sake of my father’s good name, I couldn’t take part.”

“Ah, I see.”

Anne had endured a lot of unpleasant speculation about why she’d been called up in front of the king at the Royal Candy Fair. Since Keith was the son of the Silver Sugar Viscount, he was liable to receive a shower of slander to which Anne’s experience could never compare.

“Even though my father had passed away, last year I was in mourning, so I

was unable to enter the Royal Candy Fair. Nobles have to deal with such inconveniences. But my mourning has lifted, and I am a commoner once again. My father's influence has also begun to wane. So this year, I will enter. I've been waiting far too long. Speaking of which, I'd like to get started on making my sculpture. Where is Challe?"

"He's in my room. If you go and summon him, I think he'll probably cooperate."

"Understood. Well then, Anne. Good luck to you."

Just before they parted, Keith clapped his hand lightly on Anne's shoulder. It seemed like a gesture of encouragement among equals, something Anne found very refreshing.



Challe sat by the window, watching as the glow of the sunrise gradually engulfed the darkness.

Once Anne left the room, her cheeriness was replaced by a feeling of great emptiness, as if a hole had suddenly opened up beneath him.

Unexpectedly, he thought of Liz.

Liz didn't have the habit of getting up early like Anne.

She had always lingered in bed until the sun was high in the sky.

When he naturally grew frustrated and told her it was about time to get up, she behaved like a spoiled child and pestered him to pull her upright. Even once she was grown, she sometimes coaxed him into doing it.

Compared with Liz, Anne—

She got up early enough to rival the roosters and was on the move from the moment she opened her eyes.

I wonder why she is always so restless? Whether she's laughing, or angry, or

sighing, she's always rushing around.

She seemed to never tire.

Just then, he heard a knock.

“Good morning, Challe. Are you here?”

It was Keith. Challe wiped all expression from his face, then stood and opened the door.

“I ran into Anne down the hall. I heard you were in the room, so I came to get you.”

Keith had already neatly dressed himself for the day. His eyes didn't look sleepy, either.

“I'm sorry for starting so early in the morning, but I want you to come with me.”

“I made a promise. I'll do whatever you like,” Challe answered indifferently.

Keith smiled disarmingly and showed Challe to his room.

Keith's room was the same size as Anne's. Apparently, all the rooms were built the same.

Four barrels of silver sugar had been carried up to the room. On top of the table, which was to be used as a workbench, there was a stone slab and a set of neatly arranged tools.

When he entered the room, Challe leaned against the wall.

“What do you want me to do? Shall I stand on my head? Or take off all my clothes? Hurry up and give me an order, boy.”

Keith looked up from one of the barrels of silver sugar. He turned around with a troubled expression. “‘Boy’...? You and I don't look very different in age, though.”

“You don't appear to be over one hundred years old.”

Keith looked momentarily surprised, and then he smiled in understanding. “I see. I suppose that's how it works for fairies. But I don't like being called ‘boy.’ I'd like you to at least call me by my name. Now go stand in that bright spot by

the window. That's all I need you to do. I don't necessarily want you to pose; I just want to get an impression of you and observe some of the details of your appearance."

Challe stood in the spot he was told and gazed out the window.

Doing this was annoying, but it couldn't be helped.

This was far preferable to leaving Anne and waiting alone in town. Challe was worried about the kind of trouble Anne might get into if they split up.

A thought suddenly occurred to him.

Maybe I was the one who didn't want us to separate...

Keith spoke to Challe as he scooped silver sugar into a stone bowl.

"Anne's about to have a tough time, you know. The rest of us have already finished refining our silver sugar for the Royal Candy Fair. She's getting a late start, coming into it now. Plus, she's got to work refining the communal sugar as well. Do you think she'll be all right?"

Keith seemed worried about her, which was all the more aggravating to Challe.

"That's all thanks to your buddies for not telling her about this year's special circumstances. Are you happy about that?"

"Nobody told her? Unbelievable. Why would they all...? But I guess these things do happen. I'm not happy about it, though. Actually, it's an inconvenience," Keith answered as he dumped the silver sugar that he had been mixing in the stone bowl on top of the stone slab. "That kind of cowardly behavior is disgraceful. I find it detestable."

Keith's words made it clear that their actions offended his strong moral code. Challe could tell he had been raised well and that he took pride in his fastidiousness. He had been brought up to stick to his beliefs and reject delinquency.

Challe, who had spent most of his life under human control, swimming in the muddy waters of the world's corruption, was somewhat jealous of Keith's pure, unsullied mind.

Keith dipped his hands into the bowl of cold water that was sitting on the edge of the workbench. As he chilled his hands, he said, “But thank goodness Anne is going to enter this year’s Royal Candy Fair. Out of all the potential contestants gathered here, not one of them can rival me. Even Sammy, who some people say is almost my equal, isn’t worth mentioning, if you ask me. Jonas also makes nice things, but he’s lacking some crucial element, I think. But if Anne takes part in the contest, then it’s really worth my time. I’ve been waiting for an opponent of equal skill.”

His words were full of confidence.

Keith removed his hands from the cold water and began kneading the silver sugar. “Plus, I figure this is the only year I’ll be able to compete against Anne in the candy fair. I’m very fortunate, meeting her for what will be her last chance. I must have amazing luck.”

“Her last chance?” Challe asked.

Keith’s expression turned sympathetic. “That’s right. If she doesn’t become a Silver Sugar Master this year, she probably never will.”



The candy crafters all gathered at the silver sugar refinery while it was still dark outside.

The workers who had been there for some time moved to their stations in order to perform their allotted duties.

Kat and Anne, who had arrived just the day before, were instructed to wait at the end of the building.

There were no partitions inside. It was a sprawling open space, with pillars at regular intervals.

Lined up from the north end of the building to the south were the enormous tools of the trade.

There were three huge barrels for soaking the sugar apples in water. Deeper than Anne was tall, the casks were surrounded by scaffolding.

Next were three large cookstoves for simmering the sugar apples. The pots sitting on top of the stoves were also massive, large enough to contain four or five adults.

Last was an orderly set of four large millstones. Each one was so big that it took four people to turn.

And then against the wall, there were dense rows of shelves holding the flat boards used to dry out the sugar apple pulp.

Fires were promptly lit under the stoves, and the temperature inside the workhouse jumped up.

The crafters used large nets to scoop up the sugar apples that had been steeped in water overnight. They transferred them into the pots that were sitting on top of the stoves.

Anne and Kat were told to wait near the wide-open doorway.

The crafters who had begun their work kept glancing in Anne's direction as they did their jobs.

Their looks pained her.

There were easily sixty crafters in the workshop. Every one of them was male, which surprised Anne and made her uncomfortable.

Don't tell me there's not a single other woman here?

Kat glanced over at Anne and saw her wearing a stiff expression.

"What's the matter, Anne?"

"Nothing... It's just all men. I was wondering why there are no women here."

Anne's mother, Emma, had told her that they lived in a male-dominated society. But she had also made her living as a Silver Sugar Master. So Anne found it surprising and bizarre that there were actually hardly any others like Emma.

When he heard Anne's response, Kat gazed out across the workshop like he

was checking the movements of the other crafters and said, “Sugar candy is a sacred food. A hundred years ago, not only would yer mom not’ve been a candy crafter, she wouldn’t have even been allowed to touch silver sugar. Training at a studio was considered too physically demanding for women. But the main reason was because of a holdover from the days when women were said to be sinners who disobeyed God’s will, and so they weren’t allowed to do sacred work. The clergy and the founders of the state church... All of them being men had something to do with it, too. Eighty years ago, when the leaders of the state church carried out the reformation, they came out and said women were no longer sinners because their sin had been purified by the Ancestor King Cedric. Thanks to that, things aren’t as strict these days. But still, among candy crafters, there’s this idea that women are butting in where they don’t belong.”

“Women are sinners who disobeyed the will of God?” Anne repeated unhappily.

Kat scowled at her suspiciously. “Sounds like you skipped a lot of Sunday school, huh?”

“...Sorry...I played hooky a lot without letting Mama know...” Anne trailed off.

Keith looked astonished, but he still informed her kindly, “Remember this. God made man in their right hand, and woman in their left. Then they placed that pair of humans down on this Earth. God wanted the humans to become the rulers of the Earth. But the woman was seduced by the beauty of the Fairy King and pledged obedience to him. That was how humans came to be enslaved by the fairies. The Ancestor King Cedric was the one who purified that woman’s sin and emancipated the humans from the fairies. It’s written at the beginning of the holy book. The story of creation.”

The world of candy crafters is essentially a system of apprenticeship. Students closely observe the work of master crafters and learn the required skills. Anne was never apprenticed to a master crafter, but she had always been at her mother’s side. That was as good as being an apprentice of any Silver Sugar Master.

Through the system, students inherit teachings from their masters across generations. Handing down the knowledge of the previous generations is

considered an important duty. In that world, it's difficult for anyone to accept new ideas.

Kat had said there had been a religious reformation eighty years earlier, but that didn't mean public opinion would shift so easily in accepting and allowing women into the profession of candy crafting.

At that point, Anne suddenly started wondering about something. If all that was true, then how had her mother acquired the skills to become a Silver Sugar Master? It seemed unlikely that an ordinary master crafter would have taken a woman for an apprentice.

I wonder how Mama was able to become a Silver Sugar Master?

Anne had been under the impression that she knew everything there was to know about Emma. But it dawned on her that her mother must have had many experiences that Anne didn't know about. She had never realized it before. The Anne of a year and a half earlier seemed very childish to her now: ignorant and coddled by her mother.

"Who cares about some creation story?" Mithril said sullenly from atop Anne's shoulder. "Humans just make up whatever they like. You know, we fairies have our own origin story."

"Don't complain to me. It's not like I'm the one who made it up."

"Well, that's true, but...anyway, Kat, hadn't you better wake Benjamin up? We're about to start work, right?"

Benjamin was dozing away on top of Kat's shoulder.

Kat made a gloomy face.

"It's no use tryin' to wake him at this hour. He's still fast asleep... You can basically think of him as not being here. Once the sun comes up, he'll get a little better."

Anne wondered why Kat kept Benjamin around, as he didn't seem very useful. It was a mystery.

When the sky began to brighten, faint light shone into the workhouse through the open doors.

The apprentices noticed and ran around extinguishing the lamps. As Anne and Kat watched them, a composed, middle-aged voice spoke from behind.

“So you finally came, eh, Hingley?”

When Anne and Kat turned around, they saw a man in his fifties approaching from the courtyard.

Following behind him was Jonas. He subtly turned his gaze away from Anne.

Kat grinned and faced the man square on. “It’s because you guys took forever to get in touch with me, Mr. Radcliffe,” he replied.

Radcliffe?

Anne tensed up. This man was probably the maestro of the Radcliffe Workshop.

“Your manners are as atrocious as always, Hingley. You can blame the fact that you changed residence without notifying the Silver Sugar Viscount.”

“How am I supposed to know about stuff like that? Anyway, I came. Put me to work. I need silver sugar.”

“Fine. Your skill is well-known. I’ll have you supervise the whole refinement process. Our Silver Sugar Master is recovering from an illness and isn’t any help. Right now, the proxy maestro from the Paige Workshop, Elliott Collins, is supervising. I’d like you to do that along with him.”

“So he came, too, huh? But I don’t see ’im here. Didn’t see ’im yesterday, either, in the dorm or wherever.”

Kat took a cursory look around the whole workshop, and the man in front of him answered with a groan. “He’s left the grounds without permission and will be late, as usual. It’s fine; you can take over now.”

“He’s pretty irresponsible, huh, that Elliott guy? Well, nothin’ for it. Leave it to me.”

Kat turned on his heel and walked into the throng of workers going every which way.

Once Kat had left, the man finally turned to face Anne.

“You must be Anne Halford. I am Marcus Radcliffe, currently serving as maestro of the Radcliffe Workshop. I’ve heard my nephew Jonas is very much obliged to you.”

Anne wasn’t sure how to respond to his confrontational and sarcastic comment.

“I’ve heard that you want to participate in the Royal Candy Fair, but are you sure that’s a good idea? I’ve got no reason or authority to reject you, so you can do as you please. But if you can’t keep up with the other crafters, I won’t be able to give you any sugar apples.”

“I’ll do the work. That’s why I came.”

“Can you do it? This refining process is of a rather different magnitude than the sort you’d do yourself. Can you move those heavy mortars, ladles, and paddles just like the men? Can you join and work alongside them?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“You can’t get physical labor done by just having a willing spirit. Try not to get in the way but also try to do something useful. That is all I can say. If there’s anything you’d like to tell me from now on, say it to Jonas. Everything goes through him.”

He was telling her to consult with Jonas, even knowing they had a history.

In short, he was telling her, *Don’t make complaints, don’t make demands.*

Anne could see that Mithril was itching to say something, so she gently took him down off her shoulder and held him in front of her chest in both hands.

Even if she complained, it wouldn’t accomplish anything other than giving Radcliffe an even worse impression.

“Understood.”

“Excellent.”

Marcus nodded and turned around sharply. Jonas was standing behind him. He thumped his hand hard against Jonas’s chest. “Jonas. You’d better work hard, too. Along with Keith, she’s tough competition.”

Jonas staggered backward and replied stiffly, "I know that, Uncle."

"If you fall behind that little girl at the next candy fair, you'll be removed from consideration as the next maestro. You can be sure that Keith will be the next one."

Marcus Radcliffe did not show an ounce of kindness, even toward his nephew. He truly gave the impression that he might ignore blood relationships and designate Keith as his successor.

So Keith is one of the people in the running to be the next maestro of Radcliffe Workshop, then.

That was surely because Keith was one of the most skilled crafters in the whole faction.

"Tough competition," huh...?

He would be for Anne as well.

Pressing his hand against his chest where he had been struck, Jonas watched Marcus leave.

"Looks like you have it rough in some ways, too...," Anne said. "So I'm going to have to deal with you again, am I?"

Jonas turned away. "I'm not happy about having to deal with the likes of you, either."

"Anyway, I'll go join in the work. Is that okay?"

"'Is that okay?' My uncle said it was fine, so do whatever you want!"

"All right, I will."

As soon as she said that, Anne ran right out of the building.

Jonas's eyes went wide.

"Hey, Anne?!" Mithril shouted in surprise. "What's going on?! Are you deserting the job because he got huffy with you?!"

"That's not it; don't worry!" she answered as she dashed back to her room.

Challe wasn't there. He was probably in Keith's room, modeling as promised.

But that was more convenient for Anne.

She set Mithril down on the bed and pulled out the bag that she'd stuffed under it, retrieving a set of men's clothes.

"Mithril Lid Pod, close your eyes for a minute."

As soon as she asked, Anne started taking off her clothes.

"Wah, hey! Anne?!"

Mithril frantically covered his eyes.

Anne swapped her clothes for a men's shirt and trousers.

These were Jonas's clothes, which she had acquired a year earlier. As expected, they were baggy around the waist and in the shoulders. But she didn't have to roll up the sleeves and pants as much as before.

She must have grown a little taller since last year.

"This will do. Let's go, Mithril Lid Pod."

Anne picked Mithril up and returned to the workhouse again.

She walked straight over to Kat.

"Kat. What stations don't have enough hands? Give me instructions. I'll join the work."

Supervision of the workhouse had been entrusted to Kat. The first thing Anne had to do was to ask for instructions from him.

Kat looked at Anne's outfit and grinned.

"Nice clothes you got there. Bet those'll be easier to move around in."

The work involved climbing up and down scaffolding, and a lot of other movements that Anne didn't usually have to do. It would have been utterly impossible to handle in her usual dress.

Kat pointed to the three large stoves.

"Go work the stoves."

"Yes, sir."

“Mithril Lid Pod—you go with Benjamin to the warehouse in the back. A wagon will be setting off shortly to harvest sugar apples. Get on it and help with the harvest.”

“Huh?! I’m staying with Anne!”

“Don’t you disobey me, pip-squeak! You’ll work just as hard as Anne. Do a good job and help her out. Now hurry up and get going. Hey, Benjamin, you too, get up.”

Kat grabbed Benjamin, who was dozing on his shoulder, by the scruff of his neck and lowered him to the floor.

Benjamin sat on the floor, gave a big yawn, and opened his eyes. “...Ohhh, time to work? ...I don’t wanna...”

Mithril hopped down off Anne’s shoulder and grabbed Benjamin’s hand to pull him to his feet. “Can’t be helped, I guess. We’ve got to lend Anne a hand... Come on, Benjamin, let’s go.”

“I don’t waaanna. I haaate working. There’s not much I want to do besides eat.”

“Don’t you know the saying *Those who don’t work don’t eat?!* ”

“You’re such a hard worker, Surusuru!”

“It’s. Mith. Ril!”

As she watched Mithril go, dragging Benjamin along with him, Anne gathered her courage and headed toward the stoves.

The enormous stoves and pots were surrounded by low scaffolding about the height of Anne’s head.

Apprentices were busily carrying in bundles of firewood and stacking them up near the stoves. Pieces of firewood were thrown one after another into the fire.

The crafters who were tossing the firewood in and regulating the intensity of the fires were dripping with sweat from the heat of the flames.

There were more people up on the scaffolding, stirring the huge boiling pots, while others on the platform were skimming refuse and scum off the surface.

Voices shouting about the strength of the fire rained down from above.

Anne took a brief look around at how the work was progressing.

The workers stirring the pots and skimming the scum seemed to get worn out quickly.

Their arms became sluggish, and their faces contorted in pain. When that happened, someone would climb up to relieve them.

Anne zeroed in on the pot that had the fewest number of people working on it and clambered up the scaffolding.

“I’ll take over,” she said to a crafter whose face was contorted in pain as he stirred the pot.

He looked at Anne in surprise. “You will?”

“Yes. I was instructed to do so by the supervisor, so I will join in on the work.”

“This paddle is heavy. And if you don’t stir it all the way down to the bottom, it’ll burn. If that happens, there’s no recovering it.”

“I’m well aware.”

“It’s not something a girl can do. Outta the way!” A crafter who had come up onto the platform pushed her aside. It was Sammy Jones. “You’re in the way—get out of here!” he shouted, then took over stirring the pot.

Anne bit her lip, completely disparaged.

“Oh no— Girls can’t be coming up to places like this! It’s dangerous; look out!”

Suddenly, someone grabbed Anne’s waist from behind.

She shrieked and turned around to see an unfamiliar young man.

“It would be awful if you fell and hurt your face. I’ll help you down from there. Don’t be scared.”

He had vivid red hair sticking out wildly in all directions. His smiling face was amiable and cheerful, and his winsome downturned eyes looked friendly.

“Wh—who are you?! Let go of me! Who do you think you are?!”

When she said that, the man let go of her unexpectedly quickly.

“Who am I? If I must answer, I am a friend to all women! Say, would you like to have tea with me later?”

“What?!”

Just then, Kat could be heard shouting from the direction of the stoves, “What the hell do you think you’re doing over there, Elliott?!”

The red-haired man shrugged. “You found me, huh? Good old Kat; your eyes are as sharp as always!”

“Get yer ass over here, Elliott Collins! Do your job! Wait—before that, apologize for being late!”

Elliott Collins?! This guy?!

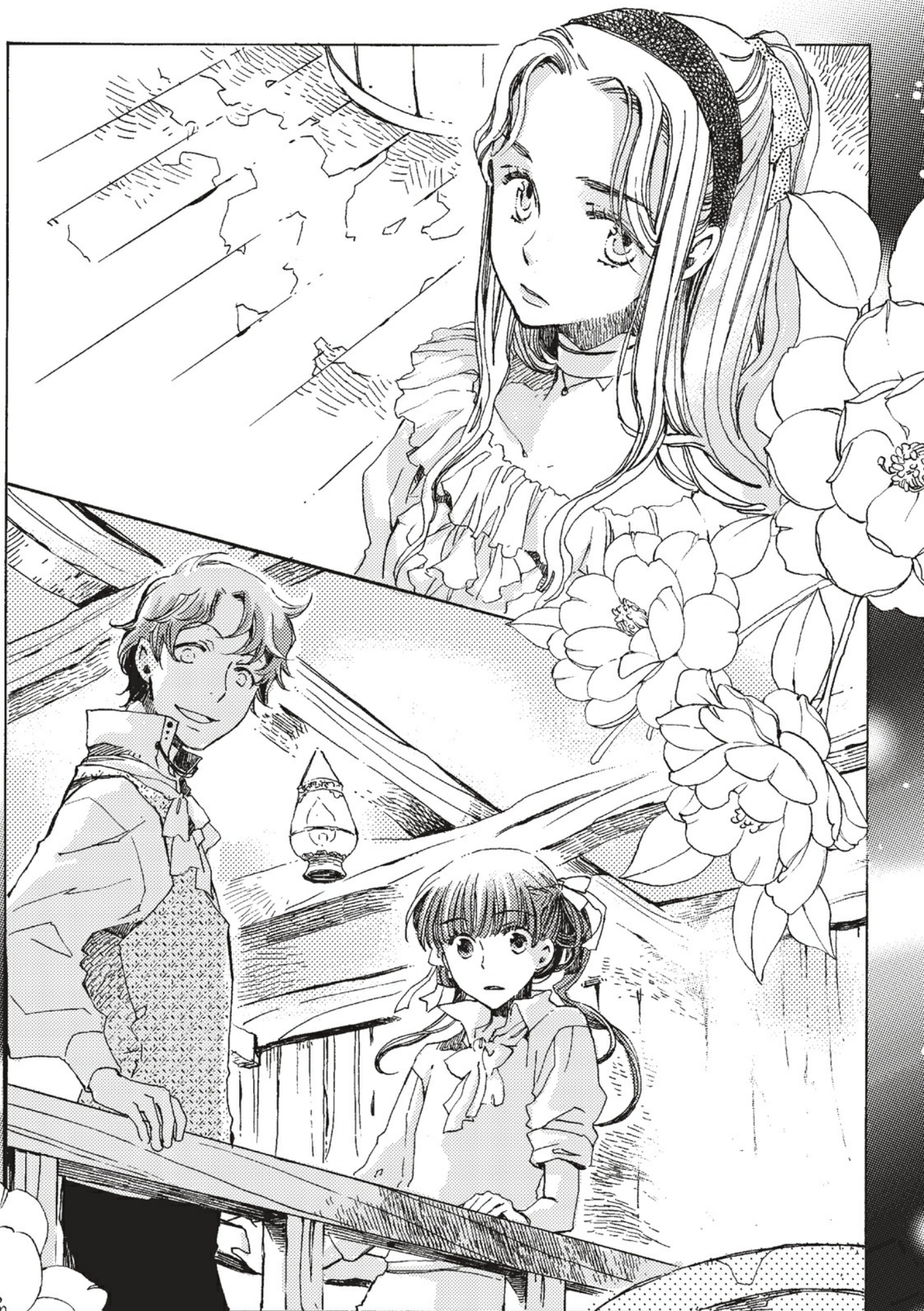
Elliott Collins was the name of the proxy maestro from the Paige Workshop. He was a prominent Silver Sugar Master.

As Anne was standing there aghast, she heard yet another voice from underneath the scaffolding.

“Elliott. Get down. That guy is coming over here. He’s Kat, right? He seems kind of scary.”

It was the soft voice of a young woman.

Anne looked and saw a woman who appeared to be two or three years older than her staring up at them through the scaffolding. She had a fragile, helpless appearance. Her eyes were green, and her long blond hair looked soft. She was beautiful.



Who's that? She's not a candy crafter, is she?

The young woman was dressed in a lavender, lace-trimmed dress. The finely draped hem spread out gorgeously around her. It was not the attire of a worker.

The woman frowned when she made eye contact with Anne. "...A candy crafter?" she murmured.

Anne was worried that she might have done something rude. But the woman immediately turned away from her.

"Ah yes, my dear," Elliott Collins said as he jumped down from the scaffolding. "I'm so sorry, leaving you alone in a place like this."

Then he stood next to the young woman and raised one hand in greeting to Kat, whose shoulders were squared off in anger. "Hey, Kat! It's been a while," he said. "Maybe about two years? Let's go drinking tonight."

Elliott held out his hand looking for a handshake, and Kat struck it with great force.

"Who would go drinking with the likes of you?! Get to work. And what's that woman doing here?!"

"How rude of you, Kat. This happens to be Ms. Bridget Paige."

Kat frowned and looked at the young woman. She curtsied slightly.

"I am the daughter of Glen Paige, the maestro of Paige Workshop. My name is Bridget."

"Why is this Paige Workshop girl here?" Kat asked sullenly.

Elliott grinned at him happily. "Bridget is my fiancée, I'll have you know. She came to see me."

"That's not true. I'm here to help. You need people for kitchen duty, so women from each faction are also gathering here," Bridget matter-of-factly retorted.

"Well, that's the official reason. She came to cheer me on while I'm hard at work in Lewiston!"

“You’re not working hard at all!” Kat shouted. While he was at it, he turned to look at Anne. “And you, what’re you standing around for? Get to work!”

“Ah, right!”

The other crafters glared sharply at Anne even though she’d answered affirmatively.

Kat saw that and scowled with intense displeasure.

“Any idiot who harasses a fellow crafter will be thrown into one of the pots and boiled alive with the apples!” he shouted for everyone around him to hear. “I will give a job to anyone who’s willing to work! Save your harassment for when someone half-asses their duties! If that happens, I don’t care if you ignore them or you criticize them. You can do what you like!”

The workers flinched at Kat’s menacing attitude.

A crafter near Anne who had been using a large ladle to scoop out scum tapped her on the shoulder. “No use fighting it. Hey! Take over here.”

“Okay!”

Anne enthusiastically went to the man’s side.

“Poor thing. Shouldn’t you give her a more ladylike job to do, Kat?” Elliott looked sympathetic. His droopy eyes turned down even further.

“What do you mean by ladylike?”

“Like cleaning, or fixing tea, or chatting with me, for example.”

“I don’t think that last one is a real job. And the other stuff is work for the apprentices. The girl is a candy crafter. Not an apprentice anymore.”

“She’s been vetted? As a crafter?” Bridget asked. She sounded surprised.

Kat declared without hesitation, “She’s a crafter.”

“But of course, that’s impossible for a woman. They get so worked up over everything, it’s ridiculous.”

When Elliott spat out those words, Bridget’s gaze lowered to her feet. “It’s awfully hot in here, Elliott. Since I came all this way, I’m going into town to do a little sightseeing.”

Bridget hurried toward the exit.

“Ah, well then, I too—”

Kat seized Elliott by the collar before he could walk off.

“You’ve got a meeting with me right now about yer job!”

Anne accepted the ladle from the man. It was enormous, about the size of a broom. It was solidly built and profoundly heavy, and she had to use both hands to hold it.

She strained with her whole body to support the ladle. She ran it across the surface of the boiling sugar apple stew. Gritting her teeth, she bore the weight.

This is my chance. Kat gave it to me.

Once she had skimmed off a ladle full of scum, she rinsed it off in a bucket of water positioned under the scaffolding.

Then she lifted it again and headed back to the pot.

If I can’t do this, I have no right to receive sugar apples.

Her trembling arms tingled with pain, but she couldn’t say a word about it.

The scaffolding was sweltering with the heat from the stoves and the steam rising from the pots. Sweat dripped from every pore in her body.

Chapter 3

WHAT I NEED TO MAKE

Anne's arms were sluggish and heavy. All her muscles were tingly and numb.

By the time the fires in the stoves died down, and work was finished for the day, the sun had already set.

When Anne stepped out of the workshop, a cool breeze caressed her cheek.

A huge steaming cauldron had been set up in the courtyard. A queue formed in front of it. For dinner, a sheep shank stew was distributed to all the workers.

Some people returned to the large dormitory room with food in hand, while some dug into their meal under the trees in the courtyard.

Anne lined up at the tail end of the queue to get her dinner. She was beginning to feel dizzy. In addition to the hard physical labor, the heat from the stove had sapped her strength.

Dishing up food from the pot were the wife and daughters of Marcus, the maestro of the Radcliffe Workshop. Accompanying them were ladies who appeared to have come to help from each faction. Bridget Paige was there, too.

There were also several female worker fairies. Among them was Cathy, the fairy employed by Jonas. Cathy was in charge of handing out the bowls for the food.

Anne finally made it up to the front. She was standing before Cathy, who was passing out bowls, so— "It's been a while, Cathy."

Anne wasn't sure she should ignore her, so she just offered a simple greeting.

But Cathy took one look at Anne and turned away irritably.

“You can get your own,” she snapped and did not hand her a bowl.

Disheartened by Cathy’s usual attitude, Anne took three bowls on her own.

She moved toward the cauldron and held them out. Bridget was the one spooning stew from the pot into the bowls.

When she saw Anne, she frowned. Then she said quietly, as if the sight disagreed with her, “But you’re a girl... What a dreadful state you’re in...”

Anne sensed malice behind Bridget’s words. Ever since they first met, she seemed to hate her for some reason. Anne thought about asking why but decided against it, as it might make her angry, which would be even more trouble. And Anne was exhausted. There was no denying that she was drenched in sweat and looked awful.

“Give me my food, please.”

Just saying that took all of Anne’s strength.

Bridget made a stern face. “Three bowls? It’s one bowl per person.”

“I’ve got companions. I’m asking for their portions, too.”

“I haven’t heard anything about it.”

“It’s fine; she gets three bowls. Give it to her.”

Suddenly, an eloquent voice interrupted them. Without Anne noticing, Keith had come to stand beside her.

“Keith?”

“She has fairy companions.”

Keith pointed behind him.

Challe was approaching, with an exhausted Mithril riding on his shoulder.

Bridget watched Challe get closer in blank amazement. Her pale cheeks quickly turned pink.

Challe took the bowls from Anne’s hands and thrust them out at Bridget.

“We’ll take our food now.”

“Ah... S-sure. Got it.”

Bridget took the bowls, filled them with stew, and passed them back one by one. Her hands looked like they were trembling slightly.

Challe received two of them, and Anne accepted the last one.

“I’m going back to the room.”

“Challe!”

He was about to turn and go, but then Keith called out to stop him, a little flustered. When Challe turned to look at him, Keith was holding his index finger up to his own lips.

“Keep quiet about the thing, yeah?”

Challe gave a slight scowl, but he nodded silently and walked off.

“Oh, wait!”

Before she started walking, Anne turned to face Keith.

“Thank you, Keith.”

“My pleasure.”

He raised his hand casually, and the gesture, though trivial, looked sophisticated. It was another sign of his noble upbringing.

As Anne started following after Challe, she caught a glimpse of Bridget. She had a dreamy look on her face like she had encountered something marvelous, and she was staring at Challe’s retreating figure.

Anne came up alongside Challe and looked up at his face as she walked with him.

“Say, Challe? What was the thing Keith mentioned?”

“Nothing,” he answered curtly and continued staring straight ahead.

When they got back to the room, Anne wiped her body down and changed back into her usual dress.

After that, she immediately started eating.

Mithril downed his dinner in one go and flopped onto the bed. Then he fell

fast asleep. The work of harvesting sugar apples was also quite laborious.

Anne had more trouble with her meal. She was so tired, she could hardly swallow. Furthermore, her arms were in terrible pain, and her hands shook whenever she tried raising her spoon to her mouth. Before she had even eaten a third of her stew, she set her spoon down.

That same moment, there was a knock at the door.

Though she was light-headed, she stood, opened the door, and saw Jonas standing there.

“The last face I want to see right now...”

Jonas looked offended. “Well, sorry to bother you. I don’t actually want to see your face, either. But my uncle told me to come by.”

“What for?”

“The sugar apples harvested today are in the warehouse. We’ll start refining them tomorrow, so we’re scheduled to soak them in water overnight tonight. My uncle said that if you really intend to enter the Royal Candy Fair, you should start soaking the sugar apples that you intend to refine into your four barrels of silver sugar.”

Anne’s eyes gleamed. “I can get my allocation of sugar apples?!”

Jonas averted his gaze. “But he also told me that your sugar apples can be confiscated if you don’t do your job properly, so you should be ready to work hard.” Once he said that, Jonas glanced back at Anne’s face. “Can you do it? You look pretty worn out.”

“I’m doing it. Are you trying to get me to say that I don’t want to?”

“Not at all. I’m not... That wasn’t my intention. Anyway, that’s what I came to tell you.”

After he said that, Jonas left.

Anne looked back at Challe from the doorway. “He said they’re dividing up the sugar apples. I’ll be back. If we don’t soak the apples, they won’t be of any use.”

Although Anne was eager to continue, her body was weak. Nonetheless, she left the dormitory and headed for the storehouse.

The sugar apples that were piled up in a huge mound in the warehouse were being carted to the workshop in wheelbarrows and dumped into vats of water.

Anne got her own barrels from her wagon and carried them to a corner of the workshop.

She filled her barrels with water and added handfuls of silver sugar, then borrowed a wheelbarrow and hauled over the sugar apples she needed from the pile in the storehouse.

Load by load, she immersed them in the water.

To make four barrels of silver sugar, ten normal-sized casks would be needed to soak the large load of sugar apples. Anne didn't have enough barrels of her own, so she borrowed some from the studio.

Her arms hurt, and her work progressed very slowly. On top of that, she frequently felt light-headed, and she had to stop and rest often.

It was the middle of the night when she finished.

Only one lamp remained lit in the huge, deserted workshop.

Under its light, Anne quickly calculated the quantity of sugar apples she had soaking in water. There were just exactly enough for her to refine into four barrels worth of silver sugar.

With these, I can make my silver sugar.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

It was all she could do to remain standing. Thinking she would rest for just a moment, she leaned her back against the wall and sank to the floor. The paved floor was cold, but she couldn't move. She was in danger of falling asleep right there.

Her eyelids drooped, and her consciousness faded. Then suddenly, her body was floating lightly through the air.

When she forced her eyes open, Challe's face was there, very close to hers.

Her body was swaying back and forth.

She realized he was carrying her in his arms.

“Challe...”

When she spoke his name, he looked down at her.

“Go to sleep.”

“But...I’m heavy.”

“You’re not heavy. Sleep.”

There was nothing to do but follow his instructions. Anne had reached her limit. She closed her eyes and surrendered herself to the pleasant swaying. She felt herself being lowered into bed and a blanket being pulled up over her. It was warm.

And then something cold brushed her eyelids.

Before she realized what it was, Anne was asleep.



Challe pushed Mithril to the side of the bed, lowered Anne into the empty space, and pulled the blanket over her.

Anne’s face was pale; it looked like she’d passed out rather than fallen asleep.

Challe leaned over Anne and kissed her eyelids.

As he did, he prayed that she would sleep soundly.

Then he sat in a chair near the window and listened to Anne’s breaths as she slept for a little while.

Just as he said... It’s best not to tell her.

He looked up at the bright, moonlit night sky.

There’s no need to put any further pressure on her.

He recalled what Keith had mentioned that afternoon.

“That’s right. If she doesn’t become a Silver Sugar Master this year, she probably never will.”

The cold moonlight shone on Challe’s cheek. The wing on his back also caught the light and glowed a bluish white.

“Anne stands out too much. Last year’s candy fair and the incident with the former Duke of Philax have made her the target of a lot of jealousy. She has a reputation as a strong professional rival, though I doubt she is aware of it. I also think that’s why she wasn’t told about the sugar apple situation this year. Most of the candy crafters would like to see her crushed quickly.”

When he said that, Keith had made a stern face, as if he felt angry at the facts he was speaking about.

“If this had been an average year, with everyone obtaining their own sugar apples, there’s no way Anne would have been able to get any. I’m sure she would have faced a great deal of interference, you see. So the shortage this year was actually a blessing in disguise for her. As long as she helps with the collective refining work, she’ll get her sugar apples. But it won’t be like this next year. If she were to try and acquire sugar apples by herself, it’ll be absolutely impossible.”

Challe put his fingers to his forehead and let out a small sigh.

“But if she were to become a Silver Sugar Master, that would be a different story. Silver Sugar Masters are candy crafters who have been recognized by the king. If any common candy crafter attempted to interfere, they would face punishment for it by the Silver Sugar Viscount. That’s why Anne has to become a Silver Sugar Master this year... If she tries to next year, things will be difficult. Despite that—”

Then Keith had gotten an even more serious look in his eye.

“—I don’t intend to go easy on her because of it. And I don’t think she would want me to, either, would she? I know I wouldn’t want a royal medal if I’d only gotten it because someone pulled their punches.”

If Anne made a sculpture that surpassed Keith’s, there would be no problem.

She would become a Silver Sugar Master and take one more step toward her future.

But if she didn't become one, then what?

She wouldn't be able to say, *There's always next year*, as she had the year before.

Putting that kind of pressure on her wouldn't necessarily bring about a good result. That was probably why Keith had warned Challe just before they parted.

"Keep quiet about it," he'd said.

Challe looked at Anne's peaceful sleeping face and resolved never to stand in the way of her future.

Anne stirred and groaned slightly, then clutched her body protectively.

Come to think of it, she was barely able to lift her arms during her meal.

I've heard you can soothe pain by cooling the area with a wet cloth.

Cooling and warming the body to heal it was a phenomenon that fairies could not understand. But Challe figured that if doing such a thing would make Anne feel better, he ought to do it. So bucket in hand, he quietly left the room. There was a well near the dormitory that was free for anyone to use.

He lowered the well bucket into the water.

In the moonlight, Challe's shadow fell on the rim of the well. Someone stood behind him, their shadow overlapping his.

He had been aware of a human presence for quite some time. But the person had no desire to kill him, so he had decided to ignore them.

"...Um—"

A frail female voice called out to him.

Without turning around, Challe pulled up the well bucket and transferred the water into his own.

"Um—"

"Wait a moment. You'll get your turn soon."

“I’m not here for water. I’m here for you...”

When she said that, Challe finally turned to face the woman.

She was the same woman who had been handing out the evening meal. He remembered her face because her light golden hair had left an impression. The moment he had seen her hair, it had reminded him of Liz’s when she was older.

“Do you need something?” he asked. Normally, he would have ignored her. It was probably the resemblance that made him respond.

“I’m staying in the main house. Just now, when I looked outside the window, I was surprised to see you had come to draw water... It’s simply cruel.”

Challe didn’t understand what the woman was trying to say.

“Making you work like this in the middle of the night, it’s cruel.”

He wanted to laugh at the woman, gazing up at him so pitifully. She was a fool.

Challe decided that there was no need to engage with her and tried to slip past her.

When he did, the woman seemed flustered and moved to stand in front of him again, blocking his way.

“Wait! If you don’t like working for that Anne girl, I’ll do you a favor and purchase you from her! If you belonged to me, I’d never make you work in the middle of the night like this. I’d never make you work at all. I’d let you live in the best room in the house and give you lots of sugar candy. I’d never tell you to do anything. I’ll do it; I’ll buy you.”

Buy me?

His anger welled up instantly at the woman’s words. She seemed to sense that his mood had changed. She went pale with fear and stepped back.

Challe was smiling. His ruthlessness was showing through his smirk.

He took one step toward the woman and brought his face right up to the tip of her nose.

“You intend to keep me as a pet?” he asked in a low voice.

His voice was sweet, intimate even, and the woman answered him fearfully.

“Well, I...I just thought...I wanted to do something for you.”

“I’m none of your concern.”

Then Challe stepped around the woman and walked away.

He wondered how he would have dealt with her had he never met Anne. He probably would have done something brutal, like lead her on for a while, only to strike her down. That was how infuriating the woman’s words had been. That was how *human* they had been.

His pace naturally sped up. He wanted to see Anne’s sleeping face immediately.

He wanted to soothe his anger with her presence.



“Empty that pot!”

Every day, Anne continued to skim scum out of the pots with a ladle until she couldn’t raise her arms.

On the sixth day, continuing the same work while dripping with sweat, someone suddenly yelled at her from below the scaffolding.

When she looked down, there was Sammy Jones.

“How long are you gonna keep dawdling as you’re scooping that scum?! The other two pots are already boiling the next batch of apples. Why is this the only one that’s taking so long?!”

Sammy climbed up and looked down into the pot Anne had been skimming.

“That’s plenty clean. Dump this pot and boil a new batch.”

“But if we don’t take out all the green foam, the flavor of the finished product will be a little bitter.”

“Only a little!”

Sammy wrenched the ladle out of Anne’s hands and shoved her shoulder. Anne staggered and missed her footing.

Before she even had time to be startled, she fell backward onto the dirt floor. She landed hard on her backside and grimaced.

“What’s a little bitterness? When you’re making such a huge quantity, the quality of each pot of silver sugar varies. We’re mixing them together, so for better or for worse, once they’re combined, it all evens out. No one will ever notice such a thing.”

The workers around them laughed, like they agreed with Sammy.

Quarreling was no good. She couldn’t afford to cause trouble with the other candy crafters. Not going against the grain was best. Despite being fully aware of that, Anne couldn’t keep quiet.

“But even so, if the quality of every pot drops, then won’t the final product be affected once we combine them? In that case, if we raise the quality of every pot, even just a little bit, the whole batch will turn out better. It’s not wasted effort.”

“Listen, that’s not what I’m talking about here. And anyway, this year’s silver sugar is just a mass-produced product. What’s the point of being hung up on the quality of stuff like that?”

What’s the point?

She felt a surge of anger.

So that means that all of next year’s sugar candy will be made from silver sugar that is ‘just a mass-produced product’? And people who buy sugar candy for important events will be buying candy made from ‘stuff like that’? Even the sugar candy for important days that come only once in a lifetime?

Still sitting where she had fallen, Anne balled up her fists on the floor.

Just then, Jonas passed by her with a flat stone vessel in his hands.

“You shouldn’t say too much; just be quiet,” he muttered.

Anne glared sternly at Jonas. “If I could make good silver sugar by staying silent, I would do so!”

Anne expected a nasty response from him, so she was surprised when Jonas clammed up. He looked away awkwardly.

Anne half rose to her feet. She wasn’t done hounding Sammy, even though he had turned his back to her.

As she stood, someone smoothly held their hand out to block her from going after him.

“Aren’t you due for a break soon, Anne? I’m on break, too, so let’s go together.”

Keith was smiling sweetly as he looked down at her.

“Keith. But...!”

He took Anne’s hand and helped her stand, then led her out of the workshop, tugging at her hand as they went.

“Keith, wait. If we don’t do something, the silver sugar will—!”

When they emerged into the garden, Keith finally let go of her. When Anne immediately tried to head straight back into the workhouse, he gently grasped her shoulders and tried to pacify her.

“Calm down, Anne. It’s all right. Mr. Hingley and Mr. Collins are supervising. They noticed that the quality of the finished product has been dropping a long time ago. And they’ve already determined the cause. Very shortly, everyone involved with working the stoves is going to get some strict teaching. There’s no need for you to volunteer for the thankless job.”

“Is that so?”

She turned around, and Keith nodded reassuringly. That knocked the wind out of her sails.

When he saw her listless face, Keith chuckled.

“You’re at your absolute limit, aren’t you? You seem like you’ve got tunnel vision.”

When he pointed that out, her shoulders suddenly felt heavy from exhaustion.

Anne sighed and sat under one of the trees in the courtyard.

“I see... So Kat has already noticed. Of course he has... Thank goodness. I must look like a fool, getting so worked up like this.”

The past six days of hard labor had been wearing her down.

Plus, she still had to refine her own silver sugar after work. She’d been getting only two or three hours of sleep every night.

Never before had Anne been made so aware of the power and stamina men possessed. They easily performed tasks that Anne just barely completed. She couldn’t help but wonder if the main reason there weren’t more women in the world of candy crafters was because of this difference in stamina, rather than a matter of religion.

But she did complete the same workload as the men, no matter how much her body hurt.

She also loathed cutting corners.

It had taken Kat’s intervention for her to be allowed to participate at all. Otherwise, the workshop would have rejected her. If the quality or quantity of her work lagged behind that of the other crafters now, his help would have been wasted.

Out of stubbornness, she refused to let the quality of her work slip. She had been wringing every last bit of strength out of her body, so she couldn’t possibly keep an eye on the behavior of everyone else around her.

Keith sat next to Anne. He tore a leaf off a weed and rolled it between his fingers.

“It’s nothing to worry about. That was bound to happen. You’re a girl; you can’t do anything about the difference in your physical strength. But that’s not necessarily a bad thing. As long as you do everything you can to the best of your abilities, you’ll be fine. I mean, even Master Radcliffe isn’t likely to take back your sugar apples, right? He can be strict, but he sees you working hard.

Anyway, how's it going? Have you finished refining your apples?"

"Mm-hmm. Just last night, I somehow finished making four barrels of silver sugar."

That was the one thing she knew she had done perfectly over the past six days.

But during the whole process, she had hardly had a moment to relax, day or night. She'd barely even had time to speak with Challe or Mithril.

"Guess you'll move on to making your sugar candy sculpture tonight. I'm looking forward to seeing what kind of thing you make. Between me and you, I wonder which one of us will make the best sculpture?"

Anne felt Keith's kind smile had just the slightest sense of challenge.

He seemed to be very self-assured. That was why he was able to look forward to their contest.

Anne envied that confidence.

She was totally exhausted just from refining silver sugar and hadn't even thought about her sculpture. She had absolutely no idea what she ought to start making.

But of course, there was something that she wanted to make.

Anne wanted to try sculpting Challe, just as he was, out of candy.

When Challe's beautiful face came to mind, she thought about how happy it would make her to be able to re-create him in silver sugar. To reproduce his form with her own fingers would be like touching his hair, wings, cheeks, and so on.

But Keith was already using Challe as a model to create his sugar candy piece. She wasn't sure she could win against Keith if they sculpted the same thing.

"Keith, why did you have the idea of using Challe as a model?"

Anne wanted to make Challe out of sugar candy because of the affection she felt for him.

A prudent-looking guy like Keith didn't seem likely to choose his model on a

whim just because he was beautiful.

“Oh, that’s easy. It’s because he’s a fairy. Moreover, he’s exceptionally beautiful, and very strong, to boot. He’s the ideal motif to charm the hearts of the royal family. I knew he was the one the moment I saw him.”

“Because he’s a fairy?”

“That’s right. The members of the royal family tend to prefer candy sculptures with fairy motifs.”

“You sure know a lot about such things. Is it a famous story or something?”

“It’s relatively well-known. If you go to the main branch of the state church, the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell, they have books and stuff about the royal family and their sugar candy. Oh yeah, say, while we’re on break, do you want to see my sculpture? It’s still a work in progress, of course.”

“I can see it?”

“Only because you’re close with Challe. I want you to judge if I’ve captured his essence properly. Come on.”

Keith tossed aside the leaf in his hand, then stood and pulled Anne to her feet.

Keith’s room was built the same as Anne’s, but the furniture and bedding were a bit more luxurious. Furthermore, everything was neat and tidy. His disposition was immediately apparent from the way he kept his room.

“Here it is. What do you think?”

The sculpture was sitting on top of the table, covered in a cloth to protect it. Keith pulled it off and urged Anne to take in his work.

“...Ah...lovely...”

It was about half as tall as Anne. Probably the largest size that was fitting for a celebratory sugar candy sculpture.

Atop a pedestal rendered to look like grass being blown by the wind, a fairy with an elegant figure was patiently crouched down on one hand and one knee, posed as if he was hunting something. On his back was one silver-gray wing.

The details of his facial features and hair were not yet complete. But his overall presence, strength, and grace came through perfectly well.

He just needs to add Challe's hair, eyelashes, and eyes. If those details are sculpted precisely...

When she imagined the finished product, she felt her heart flutter and her breath catch in her throat.

Incredible.

She wondered whether she would ever be able to produce such a result even if she did use Challe as a model, as Keith had. It seemed like it was probably within her abilities. But if there were two sculptures with similar workmanship, they would distract from each other, and both would be at a disadvantage in the contest.

It wouldn't be wise for Anne to use Challe as a motif for her own sculpture.

So then what should I make? Challe is all I feel like sculpting right now.

Suddenly, she was bursting with impatience.

She didn't have that much time. She had spent six days refining her silver sugar. There were just barely twenty days left before the Royal Candy Fair. Furthermore, at most, Anne had a few hours each night to work on her sculpture.

"How is it?" Keith asked from the window.

Anne kept her impatience in check and smiled.

"Yeah, it's amazing," she replied. "You've really captured Challe's presence."

"I'm so happy to hear you say that. I'm relieved. I'm trying to reproduce his appearance perfectly, after all."

Just then, Keith made a startled expression and looked out the window. "Hey, isn't that Challe?"

During the day while Anne and Keith were working, Challe usually spent his time alone in Anne's room. It was unusual to see him walking about during the day.

“Huh? But I would expect Challe to be in the room around this time.”

As she said that, Anne approached the window where Keith was standing. From the window, they could see the rear garden and the back door of the dormitory that faced the other direction.

Sure enough, Challe was there. As well as one other person. A beautiful blond woman was standing with him underneath one of the trees in the garden. They seemed to be talking about something.

“Is that Bridget?”

Anne was surprised to see someone she wouldn't have expected speaking with Challe. Then as they watched, Bridget suddenly embraced Challe.

Anne's heart ached at the sight. For some reason, she got flustered and averted her eyes.

What was that?

Her heart was pounding loudly.

Keith leaned forward. He looked very interested.

In a panic, Anne tugged at his arm.

“Keith—it's wrong! Don't watch!”

“Oh? You think so?”

“Yes! Come on, let's go back. If we slack off too much, Kat will yell at us.”

“Ah, you're right.”

When she said that, Keith turned away from the window.

Anne felt terribly confused, even as she returned to the workshop with Keith.

Why were the two of them together? When did they become close? ...No, I can't think about such things. Not when I have a sculpture to make.

Bridget's beautiful golden hair flashed through her mind.

Challe did say...that Liz had pretty blond hair...

Suddenly, she felt like crying.

Anne had never imagined that he would ever like her back or that he would want to be her boyfriend or anything weird like that. But seeing him together with a beautiful blond girl made her chest hurt, as if it were a cloth being wrung out to dry. There was nothing she could do to stop the pain.

I mustn't. I mustn't think about it. I have to make my candy. But I can't even decide what I should make.

Anne's pace had slowed, so that by the time she emerged into the courtyard, a considerable distance had opened between her and Keith, who was walking in front of her. Keith noticed and rushed back to her.

"Anne, what's the matter?"

Keith peered at her face, looking concerned.

"Ah, never mind. It's nothing."

She lifted her head and forced a smile.

When she did, Keith suddenly clapped his hands right in front of her face. She opened her eyes wide in surprise at the sound and the vibration of the air, and Keith grinned.

"Let's go! Hurry! We've got work!"

Keith grabbed Anne's hand and took off running, pulling her along with him. She could barely keep up and had to struggle not to fall while sprinting at full speed.

As soon as she started running, she realized it felt nice to be flying along.

They dashed to the workhouse in one long sprint.

Keith came to a stop, so Anne did, too.

As she got her breathing under control, Anne smiled a little. "You don't go easy on people, do you? I thought I was gonna fall over."

"But you didn't. We are going to work. If something's worrying you, it's best to run off and leave it behind."

Keith let go of Anne's hand and lightly placed his hands on both her shoulders. "But even if you leave your worries behind, they have a tendency to

come back at some point. If you don't mind talking to me, I can listen to whatever you have to say, though I don't know whether I can offer any advice. So concentrate on your work and make something good. Compete with me. Okay?"

Anne could feel the sincerity in his words as he looked down at her kindly. Her emotions settled down quickly.

"Thank you, Keith."



Cathy was the one who came to summon Challe.

She said that someone from the main house had to speak with him about Anne and that he should come out the back door of the dormitory. Challe thought about ignoring her, but he was curious because she said it had something to do with Anne.

He reluctantly left the room. When he passed Keith's room, he could sense the presence of people inside and hear Keith's voice. He figured the crafter must be on a break and didn't pay it any particular mind.

When he stepped out the back door, Bridget was waiting there under the eaves. As soon as she saw Challe, she rushed over to him. He stood opposite her, beneath one of the garden's trees.

"I'm sorry. I'm the one who asked Cathy to bring you."

Challe was fed up with her. He tried turning his back to her, but Bridget grabbed his arm.

"I was mistaken earlier," she said. "That girl does not own you at all, does she? I heard everything from Cathy. I want to apologize for saying I would buy you."

"You don't need to apologize. Just let go of me."

"You must be angry, yes?"

Challe was not angry. He was simply irritated.

“Let go.”

Bridget was earnest. She gazed at Challe with tears in her eyes. “Listen. I’ve got a fiancé. My family set up our engagement, and I obediently followed their wishes. After all, there was no one else who I liked. I didn’t even really understand the feeling of love. But now I... When I first saw you, I was very... My heart leaped in my chest. And I didn’t know what I should do about it. I understood for the first time that this is the sensation known as love. I am in love with you. Really, I am.”

As she said that, Bridget, overcome with emotion, suddenly launched herself at Challe’s chest and embraced him. “If you’re a free fairy, then that means you can do anything you choose to do, right?” she asked.

Challe looked down at her with cold eyes. “So what of it? You want me to accept your feelings and kiss you or something? Would you have approached me like this if I were a human?”

“...Huh?”

Bridget wore an expression of confusion, as if she didn’t understand his words. The fact that she didn’t get it, even when he said so much, showed that she was human to her core.

“What were you expecting by summoning me and telling me you love me? Suppose the object of your love was Keith Powell or Alph Hingley—would you have done the same?”

“I wouldn’t do such a thing with either of them. It would be embarrassing. And if they rejected me, I wouldn’t know what to do with myself afterward. But because it’s you...”

“Because I’m a fairy, it’s not embarrassing? Nothing weird about buying a pet fairy, is there?”

“Ah...no, that’s not what I meant—”

“If you want me, steal my wing and give me an order. Command me to love you.”

He pushed Bridget away, turned on his heel, and left.

Unable to suppress his irritation, he didn't feel like returning to the room.

Humans are...stubbornly human.

Challe turned around at the dormitory and entered the rear courtyard. When he rounded the corner, he noticed human figures cutting straight across the middle of the courtyard.

They were Anne and Keith. Anne was running as fast as she could, and Keith was pulling her along by the hand. Then when they reached the workshop, Anne looked up at Keith as she was catching her breath. Keith said something to her in reply and placed his hands on her shoulders.

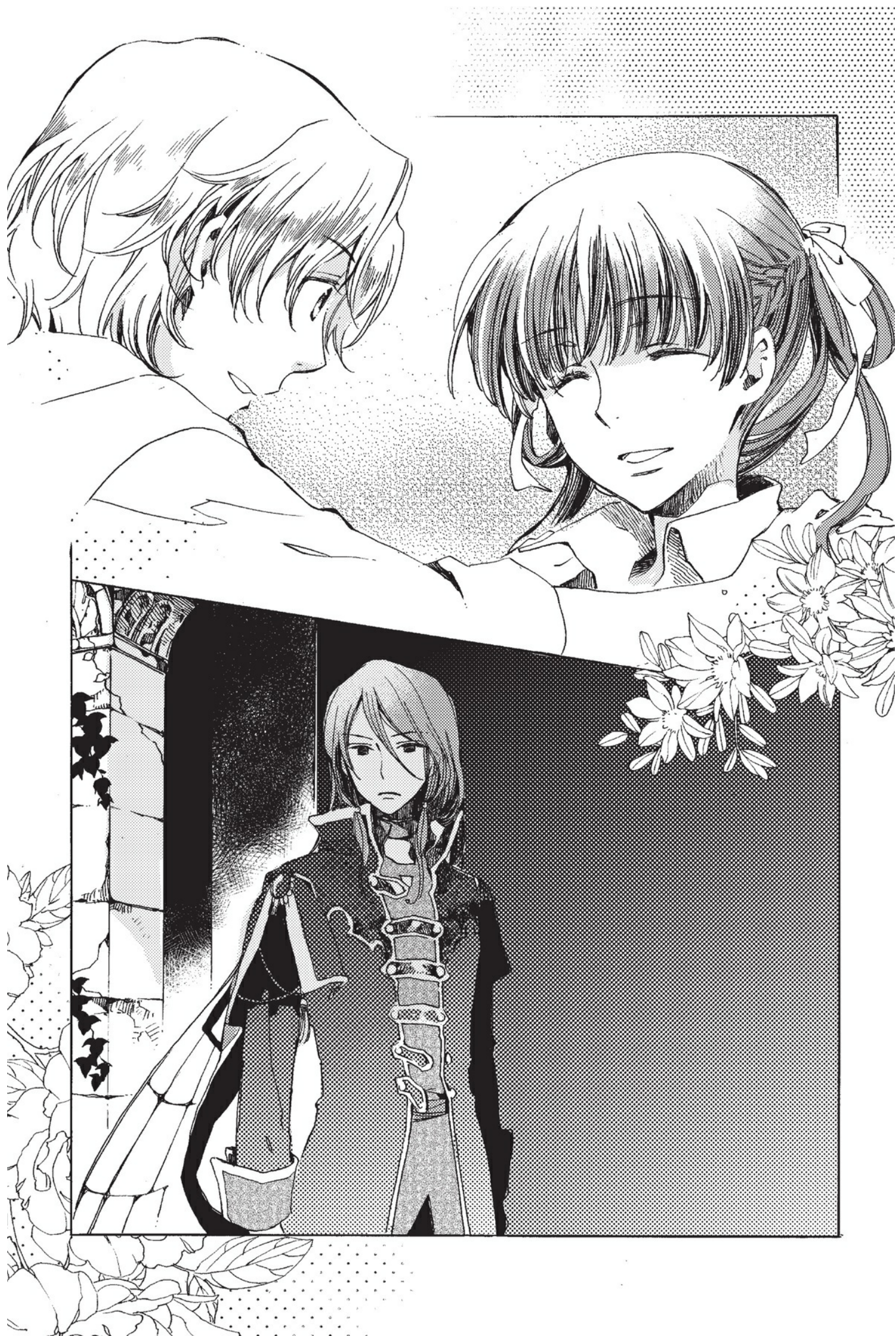
Anne smiled happily. It was a lighthearted smile.

The two looked innocent and carefree with the bright, clear afternoon light shining down on them. Keith had walked a clean, unsullied path in life, and thus possessed a noble spirit. Anne's radiant smile as she gazed up at such a man pricked at Challe's heart.

Challe tended to think of Anne as someone separate from the rest of the human race. But Anne was undoubtedly human, and it was likely more natural for them to find companions among their own kind.

It was probably odd for Anne to spend all her time with Challe and Mithril.

For Anne, happiness most likely meant being among humans like this. It meant living as a candy crafter together with people such as Keith and Hugh.



But as soon as Challe imagined handing her over to the likes of Hugh or Keith, he grew aggravated.

Why?

With Liz, he had hoped, from the bottom of his heart, to one day entrust her to a worthy human, one who could take care of her and make her happy. Her happiness had been his only concern.

So why, he wondered, did he feel irritated when he thought about leaving Anne to another human, even when there were ones who would be able to make her happy? He was behaving just like a human child. Not thinking of the future or of the happiness of the one he valued, but just throwing a tantrum because he didn't want to let her go. Even though she would likely weaken and die someday if he held tight on to her.

He wondered why he only felt these selfish feelings toward Anne.

I don't want to let her go. Not ever...

The thoughts swirled around and around inside Challe's mind. He wondered if perhaps he was simply afraid of being alone.

But he had a feeling that wasn't quite right.

Chapter 4

THE LEGEND OF THE ANCESTOR KING AND THE FAIRY KING

The next day was the only day of the whole week that Anne could relax. More than anything, she was happy to finally be able to rest her tired body.

She was exhausted, but she returned to her room with dinner in a slightly elevated mood. However, Challe had already finished his dinner and gone to answer Keith's summons.

Anne and Mithril ate their meal together.

There were exactly four barrels of the silver sugar sitting in her room—the four that she had refined by herself. She had completed all the necessary preparation for making a candy sculpture. But even after dinner, she didn't feel inspired to touch the silver sugar.

I wonder what I should make?

She started feeling impatient.

What I want to make is Challe...but Keith is already sculpting him. And besides, Challe is...

Even as she tried to think about her work, the image of Challe and Bridget came back to her, unbidden, and she felt like she was suffocating.

She shook her head slightly, trying to drive the image out of her mind.

"Say, Mithril Lid Pod," she asked, "want to go for a walk?"

Mithril broke into a grin.

“Sure. How nice, when that Challe Fenn Challe guy isn’t around, the two of us can go for a stroll.”

Mithril cheerfully hopped up onto her shoulder, and Anne stepped out into the rear courtyard.

The moon was hanging in the sky. It looked like it had been broken exactly in half. For some reason, the sight of the waning moon was heartrending. A cold wind blew, and the dry branches of the deciduous trees that encircled the rear courtyard scrapped against one another loudly.

Anne felt a little chilly. She hugged herself and rubbed both arms.

“Anne, has anything good happened between you and Challe Fenn Challe lately?” Mithril asked optimistically.

She was staring up at the moon in a melancholic mood. “...Not a single thing,” she answered gloomily.

Mithril looked surprised. “Huh? Really?”

“I mean, I’ve been busy. I’ve hardly been able to speak to him.”

“But I was half-awake the other night...,” Mithril mumbled to himself. “That Challe Fenn Challe, he... Maybe my eyes tricked me? It was dark. Well, I guess I was wrong. It seems doubtful that he would do something like that, after all. But maybe...he might have been acting lecherous in his own way...”

Anne was starting to wonder what Mithril was talking about, when he suddenly clapped his hands together.

“I’ve got it! Anne, you should try to corner him!”

“Corner him?!”

Before she could question him about why she should do that, Mithril clenched his fists, brimming with confidence, and insisted, “I’ll casually leave the room and stay out for the whole night. While I’m gone, you corner him. Tell him you like him or whatever and beg him for just one kiss. Even he should be moved by that, and there you go, your love will bloom! Right, there’s no doubt about it. Why didn’t this occur to me until just now?!”

Mithril's quest to pay back the favor he owed Anne had led him to give her some strange advice.

Anne held her head in her hands. "Uhhh, hmm...I'm happy you want to help, but I don't think that will happen. Challe being moved and all."

"But my heart would beat out of my chest if a girl told me she loved me, no matter how much of a scarecrow she was!"

"So you're saying...I am a scarecrow after all..."

Just then, someone came out of one of the other dormitory buildings. They could see it was Jonas, illuminated by the faint moonlight. Cathy was riding on his shoulder. Jonas hesitantly approached Anne and Mithril.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

"Nothing. Just taking a walk."

Jonas was carrying several spatulas of various thicknesses. He was probably on his way to the sugar candy workshop.

If a candy crafter wished to enter the Royal Candy Fair but had not been provided with a private room, they had to work on their candy sculpture in a corner of the studio's workshop.

Jonas didn't have a private room, so he needed to do his crafting there.

"A walk?" Cathy said with her usual contempt. "Unlike you, wandering around and taking it easy, Master Jonas is on his way to work on his sculpture. Have you already given up on making anything of your own?"

"You're so annoying. Shut up, ugly!"

Mithril stuck out his tongue, and Cathy glared back at him.

"You're one to talk, shrimp!"

"Cathy. That's enough already. Be quiet," Jonas chided her weakly. Then he hung his head and mumbled, "I'm going to work on my sculpture now. This year, I'm going to do it properly. Though I'm sure you're making something, too. You look at me like I'm not worth worrying about. But if I was as big of a fool as you are..."

Anne had expected him to boast like always, but what he said was spineless and weak.

“Jonas?”

“...I sure do hate you,” he muttered. With a lonesome look on his face, Jonas kept his eyes averted from Anne as he walked off toward the workshop.

Mithril cocked his head as he watched him leave. “What’s the matter with him? I wonder if he ate something bad, maybe?”

Jonas’s standing within the Radcliffe Workshop was uncertain. He was the nephew of Marcus Radcliffe, and he did have a fair amount of skill. Despite that, he was sleeping in the large common room. Keith, on the other hand, was in a private room. Jonas was probably under a lot of pressure as he was Radcliffe’s nephew. Everyone around him likely expected more from the nephew of the faction maestro.

The crafters of the Radcliffe Workshop treated Keith with deference but showed none to Jonas. There were even rumors going around that Jonas, the maestro’s nephew, would be disregarded and that Keith would become the next maestro.

If Keith were to be chosen, Jonas’s position would disappear.

“I’m sure he also has all sorts of things to deal with. Probably.”

He was most likely also burdened with the feeling of impatience.

Burdened by a panic that told him he had to polish his skills more, that he had to make better sculptures.

Everyone is desperate. I bet we’re all suffering. I’m sure that even cool, calm Keith feels anxious about the candy he’s making. If not, he wouldn’t have asked me to take a look at it. I know in my case, when I’m worried, that’s when I want someone else to check my work.

Anne looked up at the moon once more and closed her eyes.

She could still see the moonlight shining faintly through her eyelids.

Let’s think this through. Slowly.

She recalled the color of Bridget's cheeks, steeped in what looked like happiness as she embraced Challe.

Sugar candy. I'm making it. I'm going to make what I want, something incredible.

Anne shook off her idle thoughts and pondered the dilemma at hand.

The Royal Candy Fair is sponsored by the royal family. So I'm making candy for them. Keith said they liked candy sculptures of fairies. I like fairies, too. I especially like Challe and Mithril. So I want to sculpt them. But...

She suddenly opened her eyes. The moon was still glowing.

...why does the royal family like candy sculptures of fairies?

She recalled what happened with Lord Alburn, the former Duke of Philax.

In the beginning, she hadn't stopped to ask herself why he'd wanted Anne to make a sugar candy of the fairy in all his paintings. Because of that, she had taken a monumental detour in the process.

"I need the reason," Anne mumbled.

Mithril cocked his head. "Huh? What reason?"

"Why the royal family likes sugar candy sculptures of fairies. I've got to investigate that."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about sugar candy. If nothing else, now I know what I have to do tomorrow."

Anne smiled at Mithril, who was tilting his head in puzzlement. "Shall we go back to the room?" she asked. "We have a lot to do tomorrow. Let's go to sleep early tonight."

When they returned to the room, Challe had already returned from Keith's.

He was sitting by the window, apparently lost in thought. When Anne opened the door, he looked in her direction, seeming a little startled.

"Challe. You're back? You finished early today."

When she looked at him, she vividly remembered the scene with him and Bridget that afternoon. Somehow or other, Anne endured the suffocating feeling and feigned calm as she sat on the bed.

“It seems like even that boy is exhausted. He stopped early today so he could rest.”

For some reason, Challe also appeared to have no spirit. Moreover, he was subtly trying to avoid looking at Anne.

An unpleasant silence fell, as if there were an invisible wall between the two of them.

Unable to stand it, Anne spoke in the most cheerful voice she could muster. “Oh, right. Listen, both of you. Tomorrow, I was thinking of going to the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell.”

When she said that, Mithril, who had alighted from Anne’s shoulders and was busily burying himself underneath the bedcovers, suddenly sprang back up.

“Whaaa—?! But why? Tomorrow’s the one time when the three of us can finally get together and relax all day!” Mithril hopped up on Anne’s lap and looked up at her with tearful eyes. “I wanted to drink mulled wine at the Weather Vane and take it easy!”

“I’m sorry,” Anne replied. “But I need to do this so I can make my sculpture for the Royal Candy Fair. I don’t have much time before the fair, so... Ah, I know. If you want to go to the Weather Vane, how about the two of you go together? The innkeeper over there knows you both.”

“It would be torture going anywhere alone with Challe Fenn Challe! I hate the idea. I’d rather die—!”

Challe looked down at Mithril, who had fallen prostrate on Anne’s lap, and made a face of utter displeasure.

“Rest assured, there is absolutely no way I’m going, either.”

“Mithril Lid Pod, don’t cry, okay? Once the Royal Candy Fair is over, the three of us will definitely go to the Weather Vane. I promise.”

Anne stroked Mithril’s cheek with the tip of her finger. When she did, Mithril

raised his head, sniffing. He grasped her finger tightly with both hands and implored her, “We absolutely have to. That’s a promise.”

“Mm, I promise. Okay? You too, Challe.”

Challe was grimacing at the noise.

“If it’ll get him to stop crying, I’ll go anywhere.”

When he heard Challe’s offhand comment, Mithril rubbed his eyes and dried his tears. “I can live with that promise to sustain me. Anne, you can go to the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell.”

“Then we’ll go tomorrow, together?”

“No. I’m not going. Anne, you go with Challe Fenn Challe.”

“Why? It’s our one day off, so let’s all go.”

“You dummy! Anne!”

Mithril jumped nimbly up on Anne’s shoulder and whispered in her ear.

“You go alone with Challe Fenn Challe! This is your chance!”

“Chance to do what?” she asked quietly.

Mithril gave her a firm thumbs-up. “Corner Challe Fenn Challe. Even if you’re a scarecrow, there’s no doubt that you’re a girl, too.”

“Uhhh...I thought I told you my opinion about that earlier, though.”

“Go for it.”

“Not happening.”

Without hearing a word Anne said, Mithril leaped back down onto the bed.

“Ah, ahem, ahem. Challe Fenn Challe. Tomorrow, I think I will spend the whole day in Kat’s room, trying to deepen my friendship with Benjamin. Yeah.”

The next day just so happened to be Kat and Benjamin’s day off as well.

Challe made a puzzled face. “With that guy?”

But Mithril didn’t pay him any mind and suddenly threw one hand up in the air. “Challe Fenn Challe, you’ll go to the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell with

Anne, won't you?! I'd worry about her going by herself. Which means both of you better work hard tomorrow!"

That was all Mithril said before snuggling into the bed again.

"...Work hard at what?" Challe muttered after a minute.

I can't tell him...

Cold sweat ran down Anne's back.

"W-well. I'll be fine, won't I?" she mumbled. "I'm going to the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell tomorrow, but...what will you do, Challe? You can stay in the room and rest."

"I'll go. Something bothersome is bound to happen if you go wandering about on your own."

"You talk like I'm some kind of walking disaster..."

Despite her reply, Anne was indeed happy that he was going to accompany her.

But suddenly, she remembered Bridget again.

"But, Challe, what about Bridget? If you're going to go anyway, don't you want to go with her?"

"Bridget? Who's that?"

"Huh? Bridget... Do you mean to tell me that you two were hugging each other and you don't even know her name? I had a feeling that might be the case, but don't tell me, Challe, that you're extremely..."

"Extremely what? First of all, I don't even remember embracing anyone."

Anne was growing irritated. She stood, pressing closer to Challe. "Liar. I saw the two of you together from the window of the dorm this afternoon!"

Challe wearily replied, "So Bridget was that woman, huh? She was talking about buying me or whether not to buy me. She was confused and annoying, so I told her that if she wanted me, she'd have to steal my wing. I've encountered those sorts of humans my whole life; they show up from time to time."

"I-is that so?"

Anne felt foolish for being so worried.

She was relieved, but Challe sullenly turned to gaze out the window.

“You seem a little out of sorts; is that why?” she asked.

“If I have to give a reason, it’s you.”

“Huh? What?”

She asked him to repeat himself because she hadn’t been able to hear him very well, but Challe turned his face away even more.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “Hurry up and get to sleep, scarecrow.”

Challe’s abusive language was the same as usual, but Anne had long since given up trying to do anything about it. Recently, however, he had been making a better effort when it came to Anne. He had more or less stopped calling her a scarecrow.

And yet he had just deliberately called her “scarecrow.”

Is he bullying me or something?

She had absolutely no idea what would cause him to be so mean. She tilted her head in puzzlement.

The following morning, as soon as Mithril opened his eyes, he announced, “I’m off to deepen my friendship with Benjamin!” and left the room with an arrogant snort.

The sun had just risen. Anne could only imagine what a nuisance it would be for Kat and Benjamin to receive a visit from Mithril at that hour. She felt sorry for them.

The Church of Saint Lewiston Bell was on the southern end of Lewiston.

From the suburbs in the south of the capital, it looked as if the church was built to protect the royal castle, which loomed in the background behind the church’s bell tower.

The tall, slender spire of the main bell tower stood in the middle of two rows

of smaller bell towers to either side. Below that was the sanctuary, built of white stone.

The official religion of the Kingdom of Highland is simply called the “state religion.” It is monotheistic, but the sole supreme deity has neither a form nor name. It is said that God is god, and anything else is unthinkable. There are no images of God, either. This is because they are an entity that cannot be imagined by the human mind.

The state church exists to spread and safeguard the state religion.

The headquarters, the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell, was also known as a place for academic studies. Centered around the sanctuary, there were many buildings. They included a library, a school for educating clergy, and places to study.

Only the clergy were allowed to enter the library or the school. But the sanctuary was open to the public, and anyone could worship there freely.

Anne stood in the doorway of the sanctuary, staring up at the ceiling, gaping.

“It’s huge!”

The entrance had already been open when they had arrived. It had to be, because the doors were made of stone and opened outward from the middle, and they were about three times Anne’s height. She wouldn’t have been able to move them even the slightest bit. It took ten clergymen to open and close them every morning and night.

Like an enormous umbrella, the ceiling curved out from the center, and it was even higher than the doors. The sound of footsteps and people’s voices echoed throughout the space.

“Ah...that’s...”

Anne started walking down the central aisle that led to the altar, passing the rows of pews used for worship.

She was still staring at the ceiling. When she made it halfway down the aisle, she came to a stop again.

On the main altar was a white stone relief of the symbol that represented the

god, a circle combined with a cross.

Along the walls to either side stood enormous statues of the past saints, protecting the state religion.

But Anne's attention never deviated from the ceiling.

Above, there were paintings. Scenes of miracles being performed by saints enshrouded in light were stretched across the domed ceiling. But the one that drew Anne's eye was at the highest point of the ceiling. It was painted in the very center.

A burly young man with blond hair and blue eyes was crossing swords with a fairy who had red hair and red eyes.

She knew the blond youth must be the Ancestor King Cedric. He looked just as he had been described by the church leader at religious school long ago. Blond-haired and blue-eyed, wearing a helmet decorated with wings, a sword in one hand, and a bow on his back. His right eye had a distinctive wound over it.

This was the legendary Ancestor King, who'd fought against the Fairy King for the future of the human world. He had the divine protection of God, and it was said he owed his victory to that.

The opponent he was fighting against was the Fairy King.

He was a beautiful fairy. Anne felt that in some ways, his presence resembled Challe's, but they definitely differed in their energies. Challe's bewitching dark aura was striking, but the Fairy King's gallant red aura projected overwhelming strength, as if the humans would be driven back by its fiery intensity.

The battle between the Ancestor King and the Fairy King was frequently depicted in state churches. The two of them heroically crossed swords in every church in Highland. But their expressions were always painted to look very sorrowful, something that had always made Anne uncomfortable.

In the towns and villages that she'd visited with Emma, Anne had attended religious schools sponsored by the local churches.

She had frequently been asked by pastors for her impressions of this picture.

The other children always gave answers like *"The figure of the Ancestor King is*

divine” and “You can sense the strength of the Ancestor King.”

But Anne had said, *“If they both look so miserable about it, maybe they shouldn’t fight.”* She remembered getting scolded harshly for it.

“The Fairy King sure is beautiful. Come to think of it, I...I don’t know the Fairy King’s name...,” she mumbled.

Behind her back, Challe said quietly, “Of course you don’t know it. The state church has kept the name a secret. They probably think that fairies don’t need to be named, but even if they hide it, his name won’t disappear. The name of the Fairy King is Riselva Cyril Sash.”

Anne turned to look at Challe.

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve always known ever since I was born. Probably, the piece of obsidian from which I was born knew it.”

“I wonder why it knew something like that?”

“It was an obsidian inlay in the hilt of a sword. The sword itself was already rusted and had decayed, though. It probably saw something when it was with its owner.”

Challe looked up at the painting of the Fairy King on the ceiling.

He seemed suddenly mysterious—he was someone who knew the name of the Fairy King, which the church kept secret.

“Riselva Cyril Sash...”

There were no other signs of human presence inside the sanctuary. It was because worship normally took place in the early morning or before noon on the weekend. As she said the name out loud to make sure she had it right, Anne’s voice echoed faintly through the quiet space.

That’s when it happened.

“You there.”

A clergyman approached them from the direction of the altar. His hair was completely white, and the deep wrinkles around his eyes made him look kind.

He wore the black clothes of the clergy. Anne reasoned that he must be the sanctuary's caretaker.

The man stopped before them and made a troubled face. "You should know, sounds echo here. I have a feeling that I just heard a strange name come from your mouth."

"The name of the Fairy King?"

The clergyman frowned, looking even more upset.

"I suppose you must have done domestic work or something for the church? Where did you learn it, I wonder? That name—you mustn't speak it aloud too often. As far as the state church is concerned, we have sealed away that name."

The man didn't seem to be accusing her of anything, just informing her. Anne meekly bowed. "I am a candy crafter. I'm sorry about just now. For saying the Fairy King's name out loud. I didn't know it was forbidden. It's just, he knew the name of the Fairy King, that's all."

The clergyman looked intrigued. "We do see them sometimes, fairies who possess knowledge of the past. This is my first time laying eyes on one of them. And an extremely beautiful one, at that."

The clergyman gazed at Challe with envy, with an expression just like he had found a rare book he had been searching for.

"Um, sir, there's something that I'd like you to tell me," Anne implored.

"Hmm, what is it?"

As one would expect of a member of the clergy, the man was unfazed by Challe's presence and turned back to face Anne with a smile.

"I am planning to make a sugar candy sculpture for the Royal Candy Fair. I heard from someone that the royal family favors ones that use fairies as a motif. Do you know the reason for that?"

"Certainly. The royal family does tend to prefer sugar candy sculptures that depict fairies. Now, I believe the reason that the members of the current royal family favor them is because of the ancient superstition that says, for some reason, fairy sculptures bring greater fortune than any other kind. I expect that

His Majesty is familiar with it.”

“I’d like to hear more about that superstition.”

“It originates from a legend about the Ancestor King Cedric and the Fairy King.”

“What legend would that be?”

“It is one of the stories that we church leaders must not tell. Just like the name of the Fairy King.”

“I couldn’t get you to tell me?”

“Uh, hmm. I can’t, but...I can let you read it.”

“Huh?”

“Come this way.”

The clergyman beckoned to them and led Anne and Challe up to the front of the altar. Then he looked up at the ceiling and pointed to the painting of the Ancestor King Cedric and the Fairy King.

“If you view it from here, I’m sure you can see that there are words engraved around the mural. If you read them, you’ll find that the legend is written up there.”

“Oh, so there are. But—”

Anne was confused.

“—I’ve never seen words like that. What are they?”

“That is ancient Highlandia script. If you can read it, you’re welcome to do so.”

“No way...”

Anne already had a hard time with reading and writing. There was no way she could do something like that.

“There certainly are legends about the Ancestor King and the Fairy King. But there are also ones that are best kept hidden from the masses, considering the current relationship between humans and fairies. If you really want to know,

study the script of ancient Highlandia and read them after learning and preparing yourself. That is what you must do.”

“And how many years will that take...?”

Anne let out a dry chuckle, and the clergyman smiled impishly.

“Well, do your best,” he said, before stepping into the back through a door to the side of the altar.

Challe had been staring up at the ceiling the whole time.

“I don’t think I could read it even if I spent a year trying...,” Anne lamented. “I’ve heard that there are very few people, even in the church, who can read this language.”

When she said that, Challe finally lowered his gaze from the ceiling and looked down at Anne.

“I’ll tell you,” he said.

“Huh? Tell me what?”

“What’s written up there.”

Anne was flabbergasted.

“You can read that, Challe?”

“It appears so.”

“No way!” Anne exclaimed in shock.

Challe placed his index finger against her lips.

“Your voice echoes. Sit there.”

Challe sat beside Anne on one of the pews before the altar. He looked above once more and then slowly brought his lips close to Anne’s ear.

“The Ancestor King Cedric was a slave of the Fairy King.”

His words tickled as he spoke next to her ear. Anne’s body stiffened from nervousness. Her ears grew hot.

“But due to Cedric’s bravery and sincerity, the Fairy King regarded him as a friend and set him free. Cedric, too, respected the Fairy King’s nobility and

strength and considered him a friend.”

Reflexively, Anne looked Challe in the face to confirm what he had just said.

“Huh...? Friends?”

“That’s what it says.”

After looking up at the ceiling again, Challe brought his lips close to Anne’s ear once more.

“Most humans did not approve of the fairies’ rule. They gathered at Cedric’s side. Most fairies wanted to continue exercising dominion over the humans. The Fairy King could not ignore them. Still, Cedric and the king tried to find a path that fairies and humans could walk together. But trivial disagreements kept them from seeing eye to eye. Then the two of them, each following the will of their people, fought the other.”

Challe’s voice as he read the ancient script and the pictures painted on the ceiling of the Fairy King and the Ancestor King seemed to meld together into an illusory experience. Anne listened attentively to Challe as she looked up at the ceiling. Multicolored light streamed in through the stained glass windows.

“The Fairy King was defeated, and Cedric was victorious. Cedric was triumphant, but at the same time, he deeply mourned the death of his friend. The ideals that he had dreamed with the Fairy King lived on in Cedric for the rest of his days. He prayed that someday, fairies and humans could coexist together. He prayed that the strengths of the fairies might someday help humankind, and vice versa. Cedric had a sugar candy sculpture made in the image of the Fairy King for his funeral, and he offered up many prayers. That sugar candy had the power to invite great fortune...and that’s the whole story.”

Anne stared at the mural. She was curious about something.

The Ancestor King Cedric wanted to coexist with the fairies?

The enslavement of fairies was treated as the natural state of things in the Kingdom of Highland. Yet the Ancestor King, who had built the foundations of the country, had originally hoped to coexist with the fairies.

After five hundred years, treating fairies as slaves had been ingrained into

their society. Even if the legend was circulated far and wide, it was doubtful that people would be deeply impressed by the wishes of the Ancestor King Cedric and release their fairies.

Despite that, the state church had been keeping the legend a secret.

The present-day kingdom was different from the world that the Ancestor King had wished to create. The church obviously didn't want to go public with a tale that would make people feel guilty about it.

After all, they didn't want to acknowledge their sins.

This was the cunningness of humans.

Anne realized the reason why the royal family favored candy sculptures of fairies may have been due to a dying wish of the Ancestor King Cedric. He must have made a prayer of some sort, wishing that the powers of fairies and humans would someday be joined together.

And the sugar candy sculpture of a fairy that inherited such sentiments, in comparison to sugar candies of other shapes, would be able to bring great fortune. That may have been because it inherited the power of the Fairy King, who had also hoped for peace.

If those two great dying wishes had taken shape, they would have been very powerful.

"But why did the Ancestor King Cedric make a world like ours if he desired coexistence?"

"It's not what he made. It's what he *couldn't make*," Challe answered while staring at the ceiling mural. "The Fairy King and your Ancestor King searched for a way to coexist. But ultimately, they ended up fighting. The victorious Ancestor King probably tried again to find a path for fairies and humans to live together peacefully. But he was *unable* to create that world. So we wound up with the one we currently have. That may be all there is to it. There are great differences between the two races."

It was clear from Challe's expression that he had given up on something. It was painful for Anne to see. To Challe, the distance between himself and Anne probably felt vast.

“Don’t say such things. There’s no difference between us,” Anne mumbled without thinking.

Challe turned his gaze back to her.

“There certainly is.”

“Not in my mind. I mean, I like you...a lot...”

Anne was surprised at herself for saying even that much. Then the very next moment, she felt a surge of embarrassment. She cast her eyes downward and couldn’t move. She wondered what was wrong with her, running her mouth like that. Her heart was pounding just from thinking about it, and she broke out in a cold sweat.

Challe peered at Anne’s face. He looked concerned, but Anne couldn’t bring herself to look up at him. She was terrified of saying something she couldn’t take back.

She wondered what had come over her. It was as if the combination of Challe’s voice reading the ancient text, the atmosphere of the church, and the multicolored light shining in through the stained glass had conspired to unsettle Anne’s mind.

Anne felt her own intense heartbeat as she stared at Challe’s wing, which lay smoothly across the pew.

Challe’s wing was light blue, light purple, and light green. It shone with a complex yet gentle combination of colors, as if a rainbow had melted. Her love for him grew as she looked at his beautiful wing.

When was it, she wondered, that she had touched it last? She recalled the wing’s texture and warmth from that time. Wings are the very essence of a fairy’s life. That was probably why it seemed so precious. Because it was Challe’s essence.

So very precious.

She couldn’t stop the feelings that were brimming over from inside her.

I wish I could turn this sensation into a sugar candy sculpture. If I could do that, then even these foolish feelings of mine wouldn’t be for nothing.

The moment she had that thought, it startled her. A certain desire of hers had crystallized in her heart.

“Ah...Challe.”

Still holding her throbbing chest, Anne lifted her head.

“I...can make it. I want to make a sugar candy sculpture.”

Anne hurried back to the dorms. Before returning to her own room, she stopped by Kat’s to see Mithril. She knocked on the door.

“Kat, are you there? It’s Anne. I think Mithril Lid Pod is visiting your room, and, um, I came to...”

She broke off midsentence as the door swung open.

Kat was swaying in the door frame with a fierce, murderous glare. He looked somewhat haggard.

“Kat?”

“What kind of harassment is this...?”

He pointed inside. His finger trembled with barely contained fury.

“Hey, you. Benjamin! No sleeping, no sleeping! It’s your turn next. More importantly, Kat! If you don’t hold the cards out, I can’t take one, can I?! I’m in the middle of a six-game winning streak—there’s no way I’m quitting! I won’t stop until I’ve recovered from the eighty-four times I lost!!”

Camped out in the center of the room, cheerfully directing the card game, was Mithril Lid Pod.

“He came here as soon as the sun was up. Since dawn, it’s been nonstop card games. It’s like some kind of torture program. I’ll give you a wallop if this was your idea!”

Anne went pale at his bitter tone.

“I-it wasn’t me. Mithril said that he wanted to get to know Benjamin better.”

“That little jerk Benjamin spent the whole day half asleep, so I’m the one who

suffered the most!”

“Hey, Kat. Hurry back to your seat and hold the cards...”

Mithril was in the middle of complaining when he turned around to look at the doorway. When he noticed Anne was standing there, he tossed aside his cards and jumped over to her.

“Anne! You’re back?! How’d it go?!”

“Great! I’m going to start making my sugar candy now.”

“Not that, the thing with Challe Fenn Challe. Did you appeal to his lascivious side...?”

“My what?”

Challe was standing behind Anne with his arms crossed. He gave Mithril a piercing look.

Mithril choked on his words.

“Ah...you’re here? Challe Fenn Challe.”

“I don’t care about any of this, so you all go back to your own room right this minute!!”

Kat seemed to have reached the limits of his patience. He threw Mithril out into the hallway and slammed the door in Anne’s face.

“...Sorry,” Anne said dejectedly to the door.

When they got back to the room, Anne flung the window open and lined up the tools she used to sculpt sugar candy on top of the table. She pulled out a large box that was packed with vials of colored powder, took them all out of the box, and lined them up neatly on the table as well.

As he watched her work, Mithril asked, “You’re starting now?”

“Yep. Mithril Lid Pod, if you don’t mind, can you help me?”

Mithril rolled his sleeves up delightedly.

“You can count on me!”

He hopped up to stand on the rim of one of the barrels of silver sugar. Then

he nimbly slid the heavy lid aside and peered inside.

“Your silver sugar is so pretty, Anne... It’s totally different from the stuff they’re making in the workshop right now. It’s super, super, super white. And smooth.”

The silver sugar filled the barrel all the way up to the top. Mithril briefly poked at it with his index finger. Where his tiny finger touched, the sugar quickly dissolved and disappeared. Mithril nodded in satisfaction and smiled.

“It tastes different, too.”

“So it does taste different, huh? You can tell?”

“Fairies are a hundred times more sensitive to the flavor of silver sugar than humans are, you know,” Mithril replied, throwing out his chest with pride. “They’re like two different substances. Your sugar is clean, sweet, and delicious. Any fairy can distinguish the slight differences in the flavor of silver sugar based on who makes it.”



“Wow, that’s amazing! I’m so happy to have the great Mithril Lid Pod, an expert judge of flavor, say that my sugar is tasty!”

Anne picked up a stone bowl and scooped up some silver sugar from inside the barrel.

When Challe saw what she was doing, he got up from the bed where he had lain down. He probably meant to tactfully leave so that he did not distract Anne. He always did that for her. However— “Challe. If you don’t mind, I’d like you here as well.”

—Anne stopped him.

Challe made a surprised expression.

“I won’t be a distraction?” he asked.

“I’d prefer it if you were here. I want you here. Will you stay?”

“If you say it’s okay,” he answered bluntly, then lay back down.

Challe’s wing, which flowed across the top of the bed, reflected warm colors in the afternoon light shining in through the window. It had a gentle gradation from light blue to pink.

Fairies’ wings change color depending on their emotions and environment.

Anne stared intently at the vivid colored powders lined up in a row on the table.

I’ll go in order, starting from this end. I should be able to work each one into a gradation of about five different shades.

The process arose spontaneously in her mind.

Anne poured the silver sugar out on top of her stone slab, added cold water, and began to knead.

Over and over again, she kneaded the silver sugar. She kneaded it until it had the smooth texture that had given her a chill when she had touched Challe’s wing.

She wanted to make a fairy’s wing.

They carried their life force and emotions, and they were more mysterious and beautiful than anything else in the world.

Both Challe's elegant, veillike wing and Mithril's adorable, taut little wing were incredibly lovely. Anne's heart overflowed with happiness at the thought of making sugar candy with the two of them.

My wish and the wishes of the Ancestor King and the Fairy King are the same. I want to give shape to our ideals.

Once a silky luster had emerged in the silver sugar, Anne separated it into five lumps. She picked up the vial of red-colored powder that was sitting on the far end of the table and sprinkled it on each one, varying the amount of powder slightly. She gradually increased the amount as she worked her way down the line in order to create a five-step gradation, from light pink to deep crimson.

She kneaded each of the five lumps of sugar again.

She had over a hundred vials of colored powder. She was planning to make five different shades out of each of them. Anne expected to wind up with five hundred colors. She knew it would take at least that many to really capture the colors of a fairy's wing.

Chapter 5

MAKING EVERYTHING FAIR

It felt exactly like touching Challe's wing.

Anne had tried to re-create the feel and colors of his wing. It felt natural, like she was really caressing it.

But the sensation gave her much more of a chill than she had anticipated. She even felt something like a shiver down her back. It was almost sensual. She was filled with joy at the feeling of the lumps of silver sugar as she kneaded them one by one between her fingertips.

Once she started, Anne found that she couldn't stop making them. It was like she was searching for something in the work. Searching, maybe, for a way to realize an impossible world. To realize her desire for fairies and humans to coexist. To narrow, even slightly, the gulf between Challe and humankind.

Including white, Anne kneaded five hundred and one colors of silver sugar. She lined them up on the workbench in twos and threes and looked for color harmonies. Once she had formed harmonious combinations, she mixed them to create the gradations. It was easy to do with two, but when she was mixing three or four colors, she had to pay careful attention to preserve the shading.

She felt a tingling sensation in the back of her head as she continued her work. But even so, she couldn't stop.

The following day, she would begin the work of refining silver sugar once more.

Her body was always exhausted by the time she finished her day tasks. But

when she finished her evening meal and touched her silver sugar, the urge to create was so strong that she forgot her weariness.

She only slept three hours a night, and it was more like blacking out.

As soon as the sun was up, she went to work refining silver sugar, and once the day ended, she worked on her candy sculpture.

Every night, Anne took pleasure in shaping the silver sugar to resemble fairy wings.

She'd created an astonishing number of lumps of color-gradient silver sugar. She kneaded each of them even more. Without losing any luster or damaging the colors, she stretched each one into a thin film. Just like a fairy's wing.

She cut shapes out of each piece of winglike silver sugar, twisted it in her fingers, and attached it to the others.

It wasn't a rational decision that led her to continue working her exhausted body with such intense concentration. The pure urge to create was what drove her.



Almost ten days had passed since Anne's visit to the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell.

Keith had completed his sculpture for the Royal Candy Fair. The evening he finished it, Challe was dismissed from his service.

All the crafters who aspired to enter the candy fair, with the exception of Anne, had now completed their pieces. But Challe was not worried. Anne's work had been progressing at tremendous speed.

Her ability to concentrate was frankly astonishing.

Challe expected her sculpture would be finished in the next day or two.

At any rate, now that he had been relieved of his job, he would no longer

have to deal with being summoned to Keith's room every night.

He left Keith's room, feeling relieved.

"‘I can't do it' or ‘It's impossible,' that's all anyone ever says to me. That goes for you, too, Elliott. Nothing but *impossible* or *unreasonable*. You say that you love me, but all you ever tell me is that I can't do it, that there's no way."

The moment Challe stepped out into the corridor, he could hear a woman speaking, seething with barely contained anger. He could tell she was very agitated. Her voice was getting gradually louder. It was coming from Elliott Collins's room. And the owner of the voice seemed to be that woman from before, Bridget or whatever her name was.

"Now look— Impossible things are impossible, honey—"

"Everyone always says that, but that's a lie... I mean, that Anne girl gets treated like a proper candy crafter!"

"Huh? Why are you bringing something like that up? Weren't we just talking about that fairy?"

"You and your father, and everyone else at the studio, always told me, ‘It's impossible for a girl' and ‘You can't do it' and ‘No girls allowed' when I said I wanted to make sugar candy. You made me give up. And yet...and yet that girl is a proper candy crafter. It was a lie to say that girls can't do it. I'm tired of it; I never want to hear it again. And I'm not giving up on what I want!" Bridget shouted in a tearful voice, as if she could not hold her emotions in any longer.

"Come on, Bridget. Won't you calm down a little bit?"

Elliott continued to talk to her in a soothing tone, but he sounded distressed.

Challe had unconsciously come to a stop in front of Elliott's room, and behind him, the door to another room opened.

"They're a real earsore, geez. Always grumblin' and gripin'. They're like wailin' banshees! It's depressing."

Kat stepped out with an extremely sour look on his face. He looked surprised to see Challe standing there.

"Oh, it's you, Challe. Miserable hysterics over there, huh?" Kat stepped up

next to the fairy. “I can hardly believe that guy Elliott got himself a girl like her for a fiancée,” Kat said and snorted with his arms crossed.

Then he glanced over at Challe. “Sounds like that young lady’s infatuated with ya. She was buggin’ him to buy ya. But since she found out ya weren’t for sale, she’s been trying to make him steal yer wing from somebody. Be careful out there.”

“He’s not that great of a fool.”

“Well, yer probably right about that. But I bet that little lady wants you for her pleasure, no matter what it costs. You can never be too careful.”

Kat was wearing an expression of concern. Challe looked at him and sneered.

“I’ll be careful. To thank you for your concern, I’ll go find you some catnip.”

Kat’s eyebrows shot up as soon as he said it.

“Hey! Listen, ya bastard! Didn’t I tell ya to lay off?!”

Fuming, Kat stomped back into his room and slammed the door behind him.

Snickering to himself, Challe went back to his room, where Anne was still working on her sculpture.

Four days after that, Anne completed her entry.

The opening of the Royal Candy Fair was only three days away.



Somehow, I made it.

Anne felt a huge sense of relief.

But she did feel a little disappointed that she would no longer be experiencing that texture. She almost regretted having finished it. She had wanted to make more.

This was the first time Anne had felt such an emotion.

She spent her day scooping scum from the huge cauldrons, wiping sweat from her brow. She was fine as long as she kept working. But during her break, when she sat at the foot of one of the trees in the rear courtyard, the feeling of lethargy that came after having completed her sculpture made Anne space out.

She was staring up at the high, clear autumn sky.

“Anne? You want a drink?”

Keith, who was sitting next to her, was taking his break at the same time. He handed her a cup filled with cold water. She accepted it without a word, and Keith tilted his head slightly in puzzlement.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. “You seem kind of down.”

“Ah...sorry. Thanks. I just kind of drifted off. Last night, I finished my sculpture, so...”

“You did?! Really?!”

Keith leaned forward with excitement. Anne was surprised by his enthusiasm.

“Uh, yeah. It’s done.”

“That’s great! You made it in time, huh? The Royal Candy Fair is the day after tomorrow. Actually, I was a little worried about you.” Keith smiled with apparent relief.

“You were worried about me?” Anne asked.

“Kind of. But you would have hated it if I kept questioning whether it was done yet, right? I’ve been restraining myself from asking. Now I can have a real competition with you, can’t I?”

“Is it really finished?”

Suddenly, there was a voice from the opposite side of the tree trunk that Anne was leaning against. Anne turned to look and was surprised to see Marcus Radcliffe looking down at them.

Marcus was always hurrying back and forth between the workshop and the main house. He seemed to have overheard Anne and Keith’s conversation on one of his trips and come to a stop.

“You’ve completed your sculpture, Halford?” Marcus asked again.

“Yes.” Anne nodded confidently.

“I’m giving all those who wish to participate in the Royal Candy Fair a holiday the day after tomorrow to coincide with the opening of the fair. I’ll confirm that you have indeed completed a sculpture and then grant you the day off. I’ll go check it now. All right?”

“That’s fine. Please check it.” Anne bowed.

Keith added, “Well then, Marcus, please check my work as well.”

“You’re finished, too?” Marcus looked surprised.

“Yes. As of four days ago.”

“Why didn’t you say anything? You never announced that you were finished with your sculpture, so there’s been a rumor going around the whole studio that you might have given up on entering. Surely, there’s no way you didn’t know about it?”

“I just failed to report it, that’s all.”

Anne looked at Keith’s face as he nonchalantly answered the question, and it seemed to her that he had perhaps been waiting until she finished her entry piece.

Supposing Anne alone had dawdled and worked until the last minute, Marcus probably would have pestered her, asking whether it was ready yet, and criticized her for being slow. On the other hand, Marcus seemed to have faith in Keith. Even if he dawdled just like Anne, Marcus would likely never press him or criticize him. Because he trusted the young man.

For Anne’s sake, Keith had also waited until the last minute to announce the completion of his candy sculpture.

There was a hint of challenge behind Keith’s smile, as if he was questioning which of them had made the best candy.

He seemed like he wanted to compete on a level playing field based purely on the quality of their sculptures.

That was how noble he was.

“Well then, I’m going to check. Come with me. Before we go, get permission from Supervisor Hingley to take off work.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bowing slightly, the two of them headed for the workshop.

Somehow, Anne caught ahold of Kat’s sleeve as he walked around.

“Kat! Keith and I are going to take off work for a little bit. On Master Radcliffe’s instructions.”

“Huh? How could you when we’re this damn busy?!”

“Both of us have completed our sculptures for the Royal Candy Fair,” Keith replied. “Master Radcliffe is going to check them.”

When Keith said that, Sammy, who was working nearby, raised his head. He looked over at them cunningly.

Kat waved his hand as if to drive them away. “Well, nothin’ to be done about that! Finish up quick and get back here.”

Anne and Keith hurried out of the workshop.

Marcus was waiting out front.

“Shall we go?”

Just as Marcus said that—

“Marcus!”

—Sammy came rushing out of the building.

“Please take me with you as well. I want to get to see Keith’s sculpture. I’m entering this year’s Royal Candy Fair, too, but I know I’m no match for him. So I want to take a look at his work for next year. If Keith’s sculpture wins the royal medal, I’ll never get another chance to view it from close-up, right? So before that happens, please...”

He bowed enthusiastically.

“You’re quite keen, Sammy. All right, come along.”

“Thank you.”

Sammy glanced at Anne, and she got a bad feeling from his unkind gaze.

Anne took her place beside Keith and brought Marcus and Sammy to the dormitory. Keith’s room was closer to the stairwell. He took the lead and opened the door to his room.

“Please start by checking mine first. Come on in.”

Keith showed the three of them inside and approached a table that was in the center of the room. On it sat a sugar candy sculpture, covered with a white cloth.

“This is it.”

Without any fanfare, Keith smoothly removed the cloth.

“Oh...!” Marcus quietly exclaimed despite himself.

A pedestal made to look like a meadow, covered with blades of grass as sharp as swords. On top of it, a fairy crouched down low on a bent knee, staring intently off into the distance.

A graceful body, and a silver wing stretched taut with tension. The pale face was handsome, but the black eyes held a strong will and were fixed stoically on a single point.

Challe’s aura and appearance were contained in the sculpture just as they existed in real life. It was a perfect reproduction.

“Incredible...”

Sammy, too, murmured his reaction.

“Have you seen enough?”

“Mm. Well done.” Marcus nodded deeply. “Great job, Keith. It’s perfect.”

“Thank you.”

Anne had been worried about how her own sculpture would compare to Keith’s work, but her anxiety had abated. She knew that she had made the thing she most wanted to make. And while she was creating it, she had felt the happiest she had ever been.

Even if she were to lose to Keith now, she felt she would be able to give up gracefully.

Even if I lose, that doesn't mean my future as a candy crafter is over.

"All right, next. Halford?"

Marcus urged them on, and Anne led the three men to her room.

When she opened the door, Challe looked in their direction from where he was sitting by the window.

"Sorry, Challe," Anne said. "My candy sculpture needs to be inspected. Can we come in?"

"Sure," he replied, then turned his gaze back to the window.

Just like in Keith's room, there was a sugar candy sculpture sitting on a table in the middle of the room, covered with a white cloth.

Marcus and the rest of the crowd entered. Marcus recognized Challe by the window and mumbled in astonishment, "So this was Keith's model, huh...? I see. The real thing is even more incredible."

Anne approached the table and bowed to Marcus.

"Please perform your inspection."

She removed the cloth.

The moment he saw her sculpture, Marcus's eyes bulged.

"Ah." Keith made a small exclamation.

Sammy just stared, open-mouthed.

In front of them, stretching up from a polished white pedestal, were climbing rose vines, intertwined with one another. The vines stretched upward, each supporting the other, like hands reaching for the sky.

Roses bloomed in all directions.

Every blossom was made of fairy wings, as were the vines themselves. Every component, the leaves, vines, thorns, and petals—not one of them was the same color as any other. All of them combined subtly different shades, shifting

into a gradation. Within a single petal, leaf, or thorn, two to four colors melted into one another.

Overall, it gave an appearance of strange harmony. It was like a vision in a dream. Like a fleeting one that could never be touched had taken form and appeared before them.

Anne had tried to make a candy sculpture that the royal family would appreciate. At the same time, she made something that she herself had wanted to make.

The climbing rose vine was the emblematic flower of the royal family. By presenting it as a creation using fairies' wings, she was expressing the wishes of the Ancestor King and the Fairy King. And their desire was Anne's wish, too.

"Um, is this all right?" Anne asked Marcus timidly, growing concerned because no one had said anything.

When she asked, Marcus nodded, seeming startled.

"W-well done. Halford... Very... Yes."

"Thank you."

Anne bowed, and Marcus and Sammy left the room. She quickly covered her sculpture with the cloth and told Challe that she would be right back, before following Keith out of the room.

Marcus, who was walking ahead of them, was silent.

Sammy lagged a bit behind Marcus but remained in front of Keith and Anne as they walked.

"...It's great," Keith mumbled. He was smiling, with a slightly anxious, conflicted expression. "Your sculpture—it's really amazing."

When he said that, Sammy turned around suddenly. "Don't even go there, Keith! Lay off the modesty! Your candy sculpture is even better, isn't it? There's no way the most skilled guy here is gonna lose to a girl like this. If you lose to her, you'll bring shame to the Radcliffe Workshop!"

"I have confidence in my own skills. I think I've made something good and that it might even be perfect. But...when I saw Anne's sculpture—I wonder why

this is?—I got anxious. Even though I'm sure I made something amazing.”

Keith smiled bitterly and shrugged. “Let’s put a stop to this conversation. His Majesty is the one who will choose the candy sculpture. Let’s all respect the decision that His Majesty will soon make in a fair setting. That is my greatest wish.”

Sammy kept silent after that, but there was a dark rage dwelling in his eyes.

Keith said that my sculpture was great.

That made Anne happier than anything.

She finished her work for the day and, feeling more relaxed than she had in a long time, ate dinner together with Challe and Mithril.

“Don’t grin like that. It makes your weird face look even weirder,” Challe said bluntly with his salted fish and soup sitting in front of him.

“Huh? Was I grinning?”

“So much so that the straw in your head was showing.”

Mithril glared slightly at Challe for his cruel comment and said, “Challe Fenn Challe. I am always cautioning you about this, aren’t I? It’s not always good to tell the truth.”

That, too, was quite a cruel comment.

“Listen, I was just happy, so I... Sorry, was I being weird?”

“What’s making you so happy?” Mithril asked as he held his hand over his soup.

“Keith saw my sugar candy sculpture, and he praised it. I’m really happy to get compliments from someone as skilled as him.”

When she said that, Challe made a sullen face.

“Anyway, stop grinning, scarecrow.”

“It’s Anne, thanks... And what’s the matter with you all of a sudden, Challe? You said you were going to make an effort to call me by my name. You haven’t

called me a scarecrow these past six months, but...”

“I called you what I wanted to call you,” Challe proclaimed flatly.

He finished his meal and moved to the chair beside the window.

Without any idea why he was in a foul mood, Anne could only tilt her head in puzzlement.

Is my smile really that off-putting?

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

When Anne stood from her seat and opened the door, Jonas was there. Cathy was sitting on his shoulder, facing away from Anne standoffishly.

“Do you need something?”

“I wouldn’t be here otherwise. I ran into Sammy, and he asked me to come. He said my uncle is asking for you and to escort you to the workshop.”

“I understand. I’ll go once I’ve finished my dinner.”

“He said it was an urgent and important matter. I was told to bring you with me right away. Come on, let’s go.”

“Okay, okay. All right, you two, I’m going out for a bit.”

Reluctantly, Anne followed Jonas out of the room.

The workshop was deserted that evening. They hadn’t harvested any sugar apples that day, so there was no work to be done overnight.

There was just one small stove with a fire burning in it at the back of the workshop.

It was the same size as one would find in a home kitchen, and it was probably used to make individual batches of silver sugar. There were seven of them lined up in a row, but only one was burning bright red, full of fire.

In the gloomy expanse of the dark workshop, illuminated by the swaying flames, were the figures of several people.

Jonas headed toward them with Anne in tow.

“Uncle? I’ve brought Anne Halford.”

When he called out, the people standing around the stove all burst out laughing in unison.

“Sorry, sorry, Jonas. Marcus isn’t here.”

“Huh?”

Jonas was stunned.

Several of the people there quickly surrounded Anne. Two of them seized both her arms and forced them behind her back.

“What?!”

Anne struggled in surprise as they dragged her over to the front of the stove.

From the light of the fire, she could see the faces of those around her. She saw six faces she recognized from the Weather Vane the year before, with Sammy as their leader.

“What the hell is this?” Jonas asked fearfully.

Sammy stepped forward.

“Jonas, come on, don’t you think it’s unfair? It’s a done deal; she’s going to win the royal medal at the Royal Candy Fair the day after tomorrow and become a Silver Sugar Master.”

“Huh? What’s a done deal? We don’t know any of that yet. We still have Keith, after all.”

“I think it’s a given. She’s got the Silver Sugar Viscount wrapped around her finger. Keith’s sculpture is just as good as hers, but she’s going to win the royal medal, being that the Viscount favors her. Wouldn’t something like that be unfortunate for Keith? No one else is in the running but him—not me, or you, or any of these other guys. We all know that. He’s different; he comes from good stock. But if Keith loses, that will bring shame to the Radcliffe Workshop.”

“What are you talking about?! His Majesty is the one who chooses the winning sculpture, not the Silver Sugar Viscount!” Anne shouted, incensed by his absurd claim.

“But surely, if His Majesty is uncertain, he will listen to the counsel of the

Silver Sugar Viscount. If he does that, Keith's at a disadvantage. It isn't fair. So it's up to us to make sure that the Royal Candy Fair is held fairly."

"Fairly?"

Sammy approached the bewildered Jonas, put his arm around his shoulders, and whispered enticingly, "You've got a grudge against this girl, don't you? Shove both her hands into the fire. A nice, slow count to thirty ought to do it. If you do that, her hands will become useless."

Anne was shocked. The blood drained from her face, and her legs began trembling.

She remembered something she'd heard from Emma long ago.

Up until just fifty years earlier, whenever a crafter who belonged to a faction was expelled, they would be punished by having both their hands burned so that they could never do detailed work again. They could never call themselves a candy crafter.

Such a barbaric custom had died out some time ago. But like a ghastly bedtime story, apprentices heard the tales from older crafters.

"But that's— I do hate Anne, but not badly enough to do something like this. Let's find another way..."

"Jonas. Don't you think this is a responsibility we ought to bear as candy crafters? This girl made a mockery of the sacred Royal Candy Fair last year, and she's going to do it again this year. If she's not around, the competition can be held fairly. It's our duty! Our duty."

"That's outrageous! Why should Master Jonas have to do such a thing?! You all can just do it yourselves, right, Master Jonas?!" Standing atop Jonas's shoulder, Cathy glared at them and shouted.

"Shut up, fairy. Hey, Jonas. You're Marcus's nephew, right? Haven't you got an obligation to protect the good name of the Radcliffe Workshop? Marcus will praise you for taking care of this, I'm sure of it."

"B-but I—"

A cold sweat broke out on Jonas's forehead. He glanced around restlessly, his

eyes darting here and there looking for help from anyone.

“Are you that much of a coward, Jonas? Defend our honor!”

“Why me?!”

“Because it’s your responsibility— Do it!” Sammy shouted, close to his ear.

Jonas covered his ears and shrieked, “I won’t! Something like that... I’m afraid! Can’t you guys just do it?!”

“Coward!”

“I’m afraid!”

Jonas shoved Sammy away and broke into a run. Without looking behind him, he ran straight through the workshop and disappeared into the darkness outside.

Sammy clicked his tongue and approached Anne. “Can’t be helped. Guess I’m doing it. We won’t be satisfied unless Keith wins for us, after all.”

“You keep saying Keith, Keith! Do you think he will be happy if he wins like this?!”

“It doesn’t matter whether he’s happy or not. We can’t allow a member of the Radcliffe Workshop, and the son of the former Silver Sugar Viscount, to lose to some nobody like you. It would bring shame to our faction. This place has taken care of me for over ten years, since I was twelve years old. Do you think I could stay silent while that same Radcliffe Workshop was made a fool of?!”



The men behind Anne pushed down on her shoulders and forced her to kneel in front of the stove.

The coals burned bright red. The heat of the flames blasted her face. She felt like her whole body had been pierced by something icy cold. Terror welled up inside her in response to the impending violence. Her whole body began to shake.

Sammy grabbed hold of Anne's elbows.

Chapter 6

MISGIVINGS

“Say, Challe Fenn Challe... Answer me this. It’s a serious matter.”

Mithril’s expression was grave. He hopped up onto the windowsill, where Challe was resting his chin in his hand.

“What is it?”

“If a girl told you she liked you and asked for a kiss, are you the type who would gladly give it to her?”

“.....”

“Challe Fenn Challe? Whooooaaa—?!”

Mithril was suddenly flung onto the bed, where after bouncing two or three times from the momentum, he popped right back up.

“What’d you do that for?!”

“I never want to hear about your ‘serious matters’ again!”

Suddenly, they heard wild footsteps running up the dormitory stairs. A moment later, the door to Anne’s room slammed open.

“A-Anne!!”

Jonas was standing in the doorway. He was shaking badly enough that it was visible even from a distance, and his complexion was terribly pale. His face wrinkled in distress, and tears flowed down his cheeks in steady streams.

“Anne is getting her hands burned in the workshop!! Help—help her!!” he

shouted, then fell to his knees on the spot.

Jonas had hardly finished his words before Challe took off running. Mithril, too, jumped up and leaped through the air, passing Jonas's head.

As Challe left, he heard Jonas, who was slumped down in the hallway with both hands covering his face. "Please help, I'm sorry. Help... They didn't have to go that far... Dammit....," he sobbed.

"It's all right, Master Jonas..." Cathy got down and stood on the floor, then gently stroked Jonas's knee.

As he ran, Challe opened his right hand slightly. He focused his energy there. Even in the darkness of night, this produced glittering beads of light. They crystallized into a sword.

Hefting his blade, Challe crossed the rear courtyard in a single bound.

When he burst into the workshop, he caught sight of the glow from the stove at the back. As well as the figure of a person kneeling in front of it.

An indescribable rage rose from the core of his body.

"Filthy humans...!"

The crafters standing around the stove seemed to notice him. They all turned to face the fairy.

The kneeling figure also desperately twisted her neck around to look at him. And then— "Challe!"

—she called for him.

He crouched and dashed forward, his silver blade flashing as he charged.

The people standing around the stove scattered in fear. Suddenly free, Anne fell hard on the floor but managed to squeeze out a cry.

"Challe! Don't kill them! You'll get arrested!"

Although consumed with anger, at the sound of Anne's voice, Challe halted his swinging sword. The blade stopped just short of cutting deep into Sammy's trembling chest and ended up only slashing at the fabric of his shirt.

Challe stood protectively over Anne and looked around at each of the men in

turn. "Someday, I will kill every one of you," he said. "Just you wait. Without fail, I will kill you all."

It wasn't an idle threat. He meant what he said. He wondered if they understood that. They all backed up slowly but steadily, and when they had gotten to a safe distance, they took off running at full speed.

Once he confirmed that the men had all fled, Challe waved the sword in his hand and made it disappear.

Then he knelt in front of Anne, took both her hands in his, and looked her over.

"You're unharmed."

In his relief, he gently kissed the backs of both her hands. Those hands were her future.

They trembled in his grasp as he kissed them.

"...Challe. Why...did you come?"

Tears had started rolling down Anne's cheeks.

"Jonas told me to come."

"Jonas...?"

"He came to tell me you were in danger."

"...I was...scared."

"You're all right now."

Anne screwed up her face and cried. Challe held her close to his chest.

She began to wail, sobbing like a child. Embracing her head, he kissed her hair.

"Don't cry."

Her hair smelled sweet.

"Anne?! Are you all right?!"

Finally, Mithril came bouncing into the workshop. Behind him came Keith as well.

“Challe. This was Sammy’s doing, wasn’t it? Sammy and his gang. I just heard from Jonas. You saw them, didn’t you?” Keith knelt beside Challe. He was wearing a furious expression.

“It was Sammy Jones,” Challe confirmed. “And several other people. I saw their faces.”

“This is unforgivable. I’ve got to report it to Marcus.”

Anne had finally regained her composure. Her crying grew quieter, and she raised her head, sniffing.

“Anne, please forgive me,” Keith continued. “I’m ashamed to be part of the same faction as the crafters of the Radcliffe Workshop who behaved in such a way. But I won’t let them get away with it. We ought to expel them from the faction. I’m going to go let Marcus know right away.”

Keith stood to go, but when he looked toward the door of the workshop, his eyes widened. “Marcus?”

“Keith. I just got a report from Sammy and the others. What a mess.”

Marcus Radcliffe approached them, wearing a grim expression. And when he came to stand in front of Anne, he hung his head.

“Halford. I am sorry. This is a disgrace to our faction. I cannot contain my anger from this inexcusable act. Please forgive me. But I will make him bear the full cost of his actions. I will expel him. And I will make a request to the Silver Sugar Viscount that he shall be prohibited from ever calling himself a candy crafter again. I’ll get the Viscount to order it in his own name. Unbelievable. He may be my own nephew, but I’m utterly disgusted with him.”

“Huh...?” Keith and Anne said in unison.

Challe’s eyes suddenly shone with a sharp light. Mithril looked stunned.

“Jonas is being expelled from the faction.”

Crafters had begun gathering in the workshop, drawn by the commotion. Kat and Elliott were visible in the crowd.

“Wait, please, Marcus! Jonas wasn’t the one who did this. It was Sammy. Jonas went to tell the fairies that Anne was in danger,” Keith rushed to explain.

But Marcus looked unconvinced. “Who would report themselves and the actions they committed? Sammy was the one who came to me looking for help just now to tell me what Jonas was doing.”

“No! The one who went looking for help was Jonas. He went to the fairies.”

“Jonas is my nephew. Why did he need to call on the fairies? If he wanted help, I’m sure he would have come to me, his uncle. I have the ultimate authority here. Jonas knows that there is no one above me who he can rely on. Sammy was the one who actually came to look for me first.”

Anne raised her head from Challe’s chest and stood. She was still trembling slightly, but even so, she spoke loudly and with conviction.

“I think that Jonas...is afraid of you, probably. So maybe he couldn’t go to you for help. I’m certain that the person responsible was Sammy.”

“The only light in this darkness is the fire in the stove. Are you sure your eyes were not mistaken, Halford?”

“I am not mistaken.”

Ignoring what Anne said, Marcus looked at Keith. “Keith. Did you actually witness Sammy trying to do something to Halford?”

“No. Anne saw, and Challe, the fairy. But—”

When Marcus heard that, he nodded as if he had understood. “So Keith didn’t see it after all. Now I really doubt that it was Sammy. First off, he’s got no reason to do something like this. Jonas seems to have plenty of reasons to act out.”

One of the crafters who had gathered to watch the exchange spoke up. “Marcus, I saw Jonas bring Halford into the workshop.”

“That settles that.”

Marcus’s expression grew even more grim.

“No question, Jonas is expelled.”

“That’s awful... Jonas isn’t responsible.” Anne balled her hands into fists, as if she couldn’t completely suppress her anger, and stepped toward Marcus.

“Challe and I saw Sammy with our own eyes,” she insisted.

“I can’t trust a fairy. And I can’t put my faith in your testimony alone when you may be mistaken. You might have some reason for wanting to frame Sammy. It sounds like you often argued with him in the workshop.”

“We did argue, that much is true, but—”

“Sammy has been working at this studio since he was twelve years old. I trust him. Don’t tell me you conspired with Jonas to try to frame Sammy for this crime? Was this whole uproar just a trick?”

“No way. I can swear to God if you like. In any case, Jonas isn’t the culprit!”

“That’s enough. Are you still insisting on that story? If you continue to say such foolish things, you won’t be able to take part in the collective work with Sammy and the others tomorrow. The workflow will be disrupted.”

“But it’s not like I can just keep silent! I’m telling the truth!”

“Do you want to interfere with our work? I’ll have you thrown out of here.”

“Hey, what the hell’re you talkin’ about?!” Kat seemed unable to hold back any longer and started to take a step forward.

Elliott grabbed him by the shoulder. “Leave it, Kat. We’re outsiders; we can’t argue.”

Marcus gave Anne a displeased look. “Is that what you want? If you leave now, I won’t be able to give you your silver sugar for your business next year. Don’t make false and careless statements.”

“No matter what you say, the truth is the truth. I can’t stay silent after Jonas helped me, not when his life hangs in the balance.”

“I’ll ask you one more time. Who did you say did this?”

“It was Sammy.”

“Sammy came to me looking for help!”

“He was the one who did it!!”

They glared at each other for a moment, then Marcus snorted.

“Good grief, nothing useful will come of this. I’ve had enough of you. I’m wasting my time even thinking about it further.”

Marcus jerked his chin toward the door.

“Jonas is expelled. And you’ll be a disruption to the work, so you must leave as well. You may take the three barrels of silver sugar that you refined and the sculpture that you made with you. I don’t know who did what, but you can consider that your payment from the Radcliffe Workshop in recompense for what you suffered.”



“...We really screwed up...”

The following day, Anne gathered her things and packed them into her boxy wagon. She secured the sugar candy sculpture that she had just finished in the middle of the cargo hold and carried down the three barrels of silver sugar that she had refined.

“Now I won’t be able to do business next year.”

All she had on hand was a single sculpture she had made for the Royal Candy Fair and the small amount of silver sugar that was in the three barrels.

In the event that she was awarded the royal medal, that sculpture and those three barrels of sugar would be presented to the royal family.

Even if she won, she would have to watch jealously from the sidelines for the next year, as she wouldn’t have the raw ingredient, silver sugar, to make candy.

If she lost, the sculpture and the three barrels of sugar would be hers. Yet they could easily be used up in six months if she wasn’t careful. Then for the remaining half of the year, she’d be unable to do anything but look on in envy.

She had the money that she had been given by the former Duke of Philax, so she could probably afford to eat for the year even without working. But just the thought of not being able to make sugar candy made her miserable.

I wonder if I did something stupid?

Perhaps it would have been better for her not to defy Marcus, to go along with Sammy's treachery, and say Jonas had done everything. Jonas had certainly done enough to her. Taking all that into consideration, it seemed like going along with things might have been better.

But she couldn't allow Sammy to successfully get away with his crimes. Furthermore, Jonas had saved Anne. There was no way she could have watched silently as his future was destroyed. So she had ended up arguing with Marcus.

That's enough. I should quit thinking about it.

She shook her head forcefully and climbed up onto the driver's seat of her wagon.

Mithril and Challe were already on the bench.

"Shall we go? I guess for now, I can go enter the Royal Candy Fair."

Trying to get herself to think of good thoughts, Anne pulled herself together and gripped the reins.

"Hey, you over there! Wait up a minute, shrimp!"

Just as she was about to urge the horse onward, an unrefined voice called out from behind to stop her.

Kat and Keith were running toward her at a fast pace.

The work of refining silver sugar was continuing as usual in the workshop. They seemed to have found a spare moment in between tasks to come and see her off.

They caught up, and while looking at Anne sitting atop the driver's seat, Keith said apologetically, "I'm sorry, Anne. I'm sorry things turned out this way."

"There's nothing for you to apologize for, Keith. I should be thanking you instead. I'm grateful to you for everything."

"I talked it over with Mr. Hingley, and we're definitely going to try to find some way to prove what Sammy did. Then we'll see him punished."

"Just you wait. We'll catch 'im by the tail," Kat promised.

From behind Anne, Challe answered with a composed expression, "That might work if he were a mouse. Your specialty, I believe."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"Challe—!! Why do you have to hassle him every single time?! I'm sorry, Kat. Anyway, thank you very much. Please make sure Sammy gets what's coming to him." Anne bowed to Kat, then said to Keith, "I'll see you again tomorrow, right, Keith? Let's meet up at the Royal Candy Fair."

"Looking forward to it." Keith smiled.

Anne waved good-bye and whipped her horse.

Slowly, she rolled out of the gate of the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop. Once she passed through, she turned to look behind her once more.

She saw Bridget standing there beside the gate. She looked miserable as she stared at Anne.

That woman... I wonder if she really does love Challe?

As she was having that thought, she shifted her eyes to the road in front of her.

When she did, she saw a familiar sight. A person was trudging along, looking lost, with a large cloth bag hanging across one shoulder, and a red-haired female fairy was sitting on that same shoulder, snuggling up against his cheek.

Anne sped her wagon up a little bit and chased after him.

"Jonas!"

She pulled her boxy wagon to a stop beside him. Then she tossed the reins aside, jumped down from the driver's bench, and went around in front of him.

"Jonas."

Jonas gripped the shoulder strap of his simple bag with both hands and refused to meet Anne's gaze.

The night before, after Anne decided that she would be leaving the workshop, she had gone looking for Jonas in order to thank him. But she hadn't been able to find him. She heard from Marcus the next morning that he had ordered for

Jonas to be thrown out in the middle of the night.

“...What? Do you need something? Or did you come to say that it serves me right?”

He didn't seem to have slept a wink. He looked exhausted, and there were dark circles under his eyes.

“Not at all. I wasn't able to thank you, so...I wanted to. Thank you. For saving me. If you hadn't let Challe and Mithril know, I would have had my hands burned.”

“I didn't do it for your sake. I just...got scared, so...”

“But at the end of the day, you did save me. The reason why you did it doesn't change anything. So thank you.”

“Didn't I tell you I was just frightened?! I was afraid to participate in something like that. That's all it was! So why are you thanking me? You are a real, genuine idiot! I hate everything about you!”

Anne seriously questioned whether he really hated her. He hadn't once tried to look directly at her.

“Even so, I'm grateful.”

Jonas bit his lip.

“Let's go, Master Jonas.”

Cathy gently stroked his cheek to console him.

“Jonas, where will you go from here? Are you going back to Knoxberry Village?”

“That's none of your business.”

Without raising his head, he turned his back to Anne and walked away.

“Thank you, Jonas.”

When she said it again, Jonas shouted in a loud voice without turning around.

“You huge idiot!!”

Anne smiled bitterly and returned to her driver's seat.

She headed straight for the Royal Candy Fair registration.



Once she had finished registering, Anne secured lodgings at the Weather Vane.

As soon as they arrived at the inn, Anne said she was sleepy. Most likely due to the fatigue catching up to her, and the chance to release tension, she spent the rest of the day lying in bed.

Challe also wanted to take it easy in their room, but Mithril went down to the bar-cum-dining room on the first floor and drank mulled wine, with the innkeeper to keep him company.

Even as evening approached, Anne did not wake up.

Challe peacefully enjoyed the time passing. He sat on the bed next to Anne's with his legs outstretched and absentmindedly watched her face as she slept.

While Anne was at the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop, she had been constantly busy, living her life among the humans. Even when she was exhausted from her work, she had always seemed lively in that setting.

That had irritated him a little bit.

He felt much calmer now that they were back to their normal arrangement, with just the three of them.

That's selfish.

He could feel himself wanting to pull her away from the world where she rightfully ought to be living.

"Challe Fenn Challe."

Mithril quietly opened the door and slipped inside. With a grave look on his face, he hopped up onto Challe's lap.

"Will you listen for a minute? I've got something serious to discuss."

As soon as he heard those words, the vein in Challe's temple bulged. He reached out a hand to grab hold of Mithril, who rushed to stop him.

"Wait! Challe Fenn Challe! This time, it really is serious!"

"Tell me, then. If it turns out to be something stupid, I'll chuck you into the hallway."

"It's all right. Just relax and listen. Well...maybe you can't relax. Just now, I went to Anne's wagon. I was going to steal some silver sugar...no, sample it... No, what I mean to say is... Anyway, I went to see if the silver sugar was still where it belonged."

At his confession, Challe's gaze rightly grew cold.

"And? What did you do when you went to steal silver sugar?"

"I didn't do anything. I just pinched a little bit with the very tip of my finger. A very small theft. And when I did, I noticed something. The silver sugar is... different."

"Different?"

"I thought it was strange the moment I opened the barrel. I could tell just by looking at it. The color is a little off. But I figured I was just mistaken and took a little sample. And it was awful. It's completely different from Anne's silver sugar. It's not the one Anne refined. It's the mass-produced silver sugar."

What's the meaning of this?

Fairies can only taste silver sugar. That means they have a very keen sense for the subtle variations in flavor that tell them about the human who refined it.

There was no way Mithril could have been mistaken.

"The silver sugar Anne used while she was making her candy sculpture was her own. Of that, I am certain. While I was helping, I periodically sneaked a taste... I mean, I sampled it. I can guarantee it was hers. I wonder when they switched it? Say, Challe Fenn Challe, do you think this is, like, a major issue?"

"It sure is..."

When was it switched?

The only conceivable times were the previous afternoon or at night during the trouble at the workshop. Or this morning, while the three of them were going back and forth between the room and the wagon moving luggage.

But in this case, the key question wasn't *when* it happened.

Who did it?

And where did the silver sugar that Anne refined go?

If someone with evil intentions had gotten their hands on Anne's silver sugar, they might have decided to ruin it. They could have added water to make it unusable or dumped it into the mass-produced batch.

The fact that someone had gone to the trouble of swapping it out meant that some kind of plot was afoot.

And it was most likely related to the following day's Royal Candy Fair.

If it came to light that Anne's three barrels of silver sugar were actually mass-produced, it would all be over for her. She would be disqualified for not having the skill to refine her own sugar, no matter how splendid a sculpture she had made.

They would have to act quickly.

No matter what kind of plot was being carried out against Anne, she had to take part in the Royal Candy Fair.

There won't be a next time for her.

Keith had said as much, that this year might be her last chance. And thinking about the incident that had taken place at the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop, it didn't seem like an exaggeration to say it was.

For a sixteen-year-old girl who was not a Silver Sugar Master, this would mean the end of her career.

"Mithril Lid Pod. If Anne knows about the silver sugar, she'll be reluctant to enter the candy fair. Keep this quiet from her. Let her participate in it tomorrow as planned. We must let her take part."

Challe got off the bed and stood.

“What are you going to do?” Mithril asked.

“Go looking for her silver sugar. If she wakes up and asks where I am, explain it away somehow.”

“Explain it away? Got it. Leave it to me.” Mithril confidently gave Challe his assurance. Then he looked worried. “Challe Fenn Challe. Please find Anne’s silver sugar!”

“Absolutely. I will find it before tomorrow’s Royal Candy Fair.”

He slipped quietly out of the room, trying not to make any noise.

He headed straight for the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop.

Night fell early in autumn, and his surroundings were already dark.

He easily crossed over the brick wall and sneaked into the dormitory. Then without hesitation, he opened the door to Kat’s room.

“Hey, kitty cat!”

Kat was in the middle of eating dinner. Startled by the door suddenly opening, he got his bread caught in his throat, and he choked.

Unconcerned, Challe walked briskly into the room.

“Help...me...”

Benjamin rushed to offer Kat some water, and Kat drained the cup, narrowly avoiding death by suffocation. After taking a deep breath, he started shouting: “So ya weren’t satisfied just harassing me— Ya decided to kill me now?!”

“It would be an inconvenience if you were to die now.”

“So I can die, just not this instant?!”

“I don’t really care. More importantly, I have something to tell you. You need to help me.”

“First, you say you don’t care if I die, and then you ask for my help?”

“It’s about Anne.”

When Kat heard Anne’s name, his expression changed.

“Did something happen?”

“The silver sugar that she carried out of here wasn’t the batch that she made. It was swapped for some of the mass-produced stuff. The only thing I can imagine is that her silver sugar is still on these grounds.”

“You say it was swapped?”

“Would something like that really haaappen? Honestly, what is wrong with all these guys? One thing after another, they never stop. It’s aaawful.”

Naturally, Benjamin, who was listening by Kat’s side, also sounded shocked.

Kat sat in his chair with one knee up, in a display of poor manners, and put a hand to his chin. “I’d guess that the culprit is Sammy, him and that gang that hangs around with him.”

“Summon him here, and I’ll make him confess. You of all people should be able to do that easily.” Challe’s words were cold.

Kat seemed flustered as he put a stop to that idea.

“Wait, wait, wait. There’s no way we can do something like that. We don’t even have proof. Why take such a dangerous approach? For now, let me ask around if anyone has seen Sammy or the guys he hangs around with acting suspiciously. The popular Keith and the sweet-talking Elliott should be good at that. Let’s get their help with this, too.”

Kat stood at once. Then he led Challe to Keith’s room.

Keith looked stunned by Challe and Kat’s unexpected visit.

“What’s the matter, you two?”

Challe cut right to the chase.

“Anne’s silver sugar was switched out.”

Keith’s face clouded over at the fairy’s statement.

“How could that happen?”

As they briefly explained the situation, Keith struggled to contain his anger, and it showed on his face.

“I just wanted to compete against her in a public forum. Why are there people getting in my way...? The Royal Candy Fair is tomorrow. We have to do

something about this tonight, don't we? Mr. Hingley, have you talked to Mr. Collins yet?"

"Haven't seen him yet, no."

"Well then, let's go right away. Time is of the essence."

Accompanied by Keith and Challe, Kat knocked on the door to Elliott Collins's room.

"Elliott. It's me. Open up."

After a minute, the door cracked open, and Elliott poked half his face out.

"Ah— Kat. Why would you show up at such an awkward time—?"

"Shaddup! I show up when I want! I came to ask for yer help."

"My help? With what? And that's hardly the proper attitude for someone who's asking for a favor."

"Just open the door!"

Kat pushed the door open.

Bridget was inside.

She sat at the table in the middle of the room, holding a bottle of wine in her hand. She poured the wine into a cup and took a long drink, glaring in their direction.

"Whassat dumb woman doin' here?"

Elliott rushed to stop Kat's unsparing mouth.

"Shh, shh! This is the charming ritual of a lovelorn girl drowning her sorrows. I'm keeping her company tonight, so go back to your room, kitty Kat."

"Don't call me that; it's sickening. And there's no time for all that. Anne Halford is in trouble. Come lend us a hand."

"You dumbass. Don't say that name!"

"Anne?"

Bridget screwed up her face. In a tearful voice that sounded like she might burst out crying at any moment, she squeaked, "What's the matter with her?"

Did something happen? Is that why Kat came here? How nice to be her. To not have everyone telling her no, she can't do this or that. To be pampered and protected and flatter herself making believe she's a candy crafter. To be spoiled..."

Elliott looked up at the ceiling and clapped his hand onto his forehead in exasperation.

Challe pushed Kat aside, shoving his way into the room, with Keith trailing after him. "Shut up," Challe said. "You know nothing, and you've no right to say such selfish things."

"Oh...it's you..."

Bridget stood, and the cup fell from her hand. She was very red, but not because she was drunk.

"She's never given up, no matter what happened," Challe continued. "That's all there is to it. If anyone is spoiled, it's women like you."

Bridget hung her head and sat in her chair with a *thump*. Elliott gave her a pitiful look, sat beside her, and started rubbing her back.

Challe didn't intend to entertain her any further. He jerked his chin toward Kat, urging him to explain.

Kat put both hands on the table and leaned toward Elliott. "Listen, Elliott. Anne Halford left here this morning, right?"

"Indeed, she gallantly rode off of her own accord."

"Anne took her sculpture with her, plus the three barrels of silver sugar that she refined. That was so she could enter the Royal Candy Fair. But apparently, those three casks of silver sugar were swapped with the mass-produced stuff."

"Ugh." Elliott shrugged in exasperation. "Who would do such a petty thing?"

"I think I've got an idea," Kat said. "But since we don't have any proof, first I wanna find out if anyone saw anything."

"...I saw them."

Bridget muttered a few words without lifting her head.

“What’d you say?” Kat asked.

Without raising her head, Bridget answered matter-of-factly, “I saw the culprit. From my room in the main house, I’ve got a good view of the rear courtyard. And of this dorm, too. This morning, while Anne Halford and her fairies were moving her things out, the perpetrator went inside the dormitory carrying three barrels. Then after she and the others had left the grounds, he came out again, carrying three casks.”

Challe approached the table and looked down at Bridget. “You watched this happen?”

She finally looked up. Her face was red, but there was a defiant light in her eyes. “I did. All of it. Because I was watching you.”

“What did he do with the silver sugar? Do you know?”

“I do know. I thought it was strange, so I left my room and sneaked a look at what was going on.”

“Whose doing was it? Where is the silver sugar?”

Bridget smiled darkly. Then she turned her face away.

“I have no intention of telling you.”



The Royal Candy Fair was due to start any minute.

Anne had taken her sugar candy sculpture and the three barrels of sugar from the cargo hold of her boxy wagon, then carried them to the site. Just like the year before, in the plaza overlooked by the enormous royal palace, there were tables lined up in a row, prepared for displaying the candy sculptures.

Anne placed her piece on a table according to the number that she had been assigned.

The barrels of silver sugar had been collected at the edge of the plaza. So that

it would be clear whose casks were whose, the participants' names were written on their respective barrels by an official before entering the square.

With her preparations complete, Anne turned anxiously to Mithril, who was riding on her shoulder.

"Hey, is Challe really okay, Mithril Lid Pod?"

"H-he's fine! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...ha..."

"I mean, you said that his hiccups wouldn't stop, so he went to a shop at the edge of town to get medicinal herbs that'll help. Those have to be some terrible hiccups, right?"

"W-well, I'm sure they're not all that bad. H-he's a-always getting them. He'll be fine once he eats some grass."

"Huh? But if he needs grass, there's some just over there."

"Whoops, I meant herbs."

Something was definitely off. Anne was certain that Mithril was hiding something, but she didn't know what it was.

She also wondered why Challe had disappeared.

It was making her anxious.

She feared something bad might be happening.

One after another, the entrants in the Royal Candy Fair gathered. There were twenty of them that year. Anne knew every one of their faces. That was because the year's hopefuls, without exception, had been staying at the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop. Of course, Sammy Jones was there, too. He kept looking at her and grinning from a spot a short distance away.

Most of the crafters had assembled and were standing neatly in their places.

The townspeople had gathered, brimming with curiosity. They surrounded the entire plaza. Word had spread that the previous year's Royal Candy Fair had been a real spectacle, so there was an even bigger crowd this year.

Anne couldn't see Keith anywhere, even though it was almost time for the king to arrive.

What could have happened to him?

Just as she was starting to get worried, Keith hurried into the plaza. Anne was relieved.

Keith carried in his barrels and placed his sugar candy sculpture in the spot assigned to him. Then he ran quickly over to Anne.

“I’m sorry, Anne. I don’t think we’re going to make it in time. She won’t talk. Challe stayed behind alone to persuade her. And Mr. Hingley is on his way here. He said he might be able to help you if anything happens. There’s no question that some sort of scheme is in the works. But we don’t know what is going to happen. To think that the candy fair where I go up against you would come to this. I...”

Anne tilted her head in puzzlement at Keith’s strange behavior. “What are you talking about?” she asked. “You were with Challe this whole time?”

“You...don’t know?!”

Just then, there was a commotion at the tent where the Earl of Downing, the Silver Sugar Viscount, and the other officials were waiting.

Soon after, Hugh Mercury, the Silver Sugar Viscount, slowly emerged from behind a tent flap. Standing in front of the line of candy crafters, he squinted.

“Keith Powell. Stay in your own spot.”

Keith looked like he wanted to say something, but he went back to his own place. After Hugh saw him return, he nimbly raised one hand.

“Ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, His Majesty has yet to take his seat. The opening of the Royal Candy Fair has yet to be proclaimed. Before that announcement can take place, something has happened, which I must verify.”

There was a piece of paper in Hugh’s hand.

“This morning, this letter was delivered to me. Written in it is the following: ‘Anne Halford, who intends to enter the Royal Candy Fair today, is not fit to be called a candy crafter.’”

Anne was shocked.

The letter's about me?!

There was a commotion among the spectators, as well as the other candy crafters. Their eyes all focused on Anne.

“She is an utter amateur when it comes to refining silver sugar and doesn’t have the skills to do it on her own. As proof, the three barrels that she brought with her contain the mass-produced sugar made as part of the special measures stemming from this year’s poor harvest. The difference should be obvious when compared with silver sugar refined by a proper candy crafter in individual batches. I hope that you will verify this.”

Hugh, who had indifferently read the letter out loud, folded it neatly and put it in his pocket.

What a nasty accusation!

Anne’s anger surged, and her balled-up fists trembled.

“So then, Anne Halford. I would like to check your silver sugar; is that all right?”

Hugh fixed his eyes on Anne.

“Silver Sugar Viscount! This is just ridiculous!” Keith yelled. “Do you take every libelous letter that comes to you seriously?” He didn’t seem like he could stop himself from shouting.

“Don’t speak out of turn, Keith Powell. Even if it is libel, if I don’t check, it will cause trouble down the line. And if it turns out to be nothing, then all is well. All right, Halford?”

Anne looked straight back at Hugh’s stern face.

“I don’t mind. Go ahead.”

Chapter 7

BROKEN SUGAR CANDY

“It’s probably best if I’m not here— I’ll step outside. Bridget, you have a nice long talk with that guy, now.”

Keith and Kat were both on their way to the Royal Candy Fair. Only Challe and Elliott stayed behind with Bridget.

But after a few minutes, Elliott waved farewell and stepped outside.

Elliott Collins was an unpredictable man.

His own fiancée was saying she was in love with a fairy, and that she was going out of her mind with desire for him. But Elliott did not react to her conduct with jealousy or sadness. He just watched over her and soothed her, as if the whole thing was a minor nuisance.

Day had broken, and the commencement of the Royal Candy Fair was fast approaching.

Bridget had remained silent.

Keith and Kat had stayed up all night searching the studio, but in the end, they hadn’t been able to find Anne’s silver sugar anywhere. With looks of despair on their faces, the two of them had headed for the plaza in front of the royal castle.

Perhaps Anne’s silver sugar was very skillfully hidden. Or maybe it was gone altogether.

Challe sat on top of the table and looked down at Bridget, who was sitting in a

chair.

“Does the silver sugar that Anne refined no longer exist? If that’s the case, I’ll go.”

If Anne’s sugar had been destroyed, it would be a waste of Challe’s time for him and Bridget to sit there glaring at each other. He didn’t know what he would do in that case, but if there was no sugar to find, he felt like he ought to hurry to Anne’s side.

When he asked her that, Bridget smiled ruefully. “It exists. Even that good-for-nothing guy was spellbound when he saw that silver sugar. He didn’t look like he could bring himself to ruin it. And I can understand that feeling, given that I’m the daughter of a Silver Sugar Master.”

“Where is it? Tell me. Otherwise, I’ll kill you.”

Bridget snickered at Challe’s coldhearted words.

“That would be fine by me. She won’t be able to become a Silver Sugar Master, and as a fairy who killed a human, you will be executed. You’ll never make it back to her. It’ll be a lovers’ suicide, you and me.”

Threats won’t work against her.

Against an adversary as stubborn and strongly fixated as Bridget, even thrusting his sword at the base of her throat would have no result.

The light streaming in through the window formed a bright square on the floor. The workers were up and about, and the rear courtyard was filled with their voices as they headed for the workshop. Several small birds sat on the windowsill, chirping.

Challe softly closed his eyes and listened to the lively, bright chatter.

The Royal Candy Fair was starting very soon. If Anne was eliminated this time, she wouldn’t get another chance.

If Kat or Hugh requested it, she might get to try again. But there was the question of whether Anne would accept their help. She would likely hesitate to do so. Furthermore, the king and the Earl of Downing might have reservations about the girl who had caused an uproar at two consecutive Royal Candy Fairs.

It was hard to say whether they would actually allow her to participate a third time.

Challe wanted to make it so that Anne could live the life she wanted next year.

He had long since realized a way that he could do that. But he hadn't been able to get the words out of his mouth.

If this was for Liz, no question about it, I would have immediately suggested it.

But for Anne's sake, he couldn't.

No matter what he wanted, the selfish feelings inside him stood in his way. He wasn't thinking about Anne's future or her life; he just never wanted to be apart from her.

The bell at the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell rang out solemnly over the city.

It was time for the Royal Candy Fair. At the bell's signal, Challe opened his eyes.

The morning sun flooding in made him think of Anne's future. It would be too heartrending to extinguish that light.

Challe's selfish feelings would not be pacified, so he forced them to the back of his mind as he opened his mouth.

"Do you still want my wing?" he asked quietly.

Bridget looked in his direction.

"...I want it."

"If I give it to you, in exchange, will you tell me the location of Anne's silver sugar?"

"Yes."

There was no hesitation in Bridget's response.

Challe dug through the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a leather pouch. He flung it unceremoniously into her lap.

"Tell me."

Bridget gingerly picked up the leather pouch, opened the top, and pulled out the wing that was folded up inside it. Spread out, it had no fold or creases, and it was smooth and soft like translucent silk.

“Your wing.”

She laid it out lovingly across her open palms and stared intently down at it.

Then Bridget slowly raised her head and gave him a command that sounded like an entreaty.

“Kiss me.”

Without hesitation, Challe put his hand on her chin and leaned over her. He pressed his lips against hers.

He didn’t know how she felt about the simple peck, but when he pulled away, Bridget breathed a little sigh.

“I’ll show you. Come on.”

Then she stood.



The three barrels with *Halford* written on them were brought before Hugh.

“Acting as inspectors will be myself and the maestro of the Radcliffe Workshop, Marcus Radcliffe. We will verify the sugar together. That way, there can be no objection. Radcliffe and Halford, come join me.”

On Hugh’s command, Marcus came out of the tent.

At that very moment, the bell at the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell rang out solemnly throughout the city.

“I’ll be back. Mithril Lid Pod, just wait for me here.”

With a nervous expression on her face, Anne lowered Mithril onto the table from where he had been perched on her shoulder. Mithril looked as if he might start crying at any moment.

“Anne. Wait, Anne. Listen to me, that’s—”

“It’s fine. I’ll be right back,” she said.

She lifted her head and stepped forward before Hugh.

“I will open the lids.”

“Very well. Open them.”

Anne wanted to dispel the ridiculous false accusation with her own hands.

However, she was startled when she opened the lid of the first barrel.

It’s different?!

In a panic, she opened the remaining two barrels, but they did not contain her sugar, either. She could tell right away. Both the color and texture were wrong.

Anne stared, dumbfounded.

“How...?”

Hugh and Marcus peered into the three barrels and grimaced.

After examining the color, the two of them scooped the silver sugar into their hands and let it fall from a certain height. They also each pinched a small amount and brought it to their lips to taste.

“This is the mass-produced silver sugar that was made at the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop this year. Unavoidably, the process produces sugar that is of lower quality than the sugar refined in individual batches. And this is that sugar.”

All commotion stopped at the sound of Marcus’s solemn voice. The plaza fell silent.

Hugh’s voice echoed through the quiet square. “There is no doubt that this is mass-produced silver sugar. There is no way the result would be so crude if it wasn’t.”

“...I know that I...I refined my silver sugar with my own hands, and I used it to create my sculpture. I’m sure of that. But I don’t know how these three barrels came to contain the mass-produced sugar...”

Anne desperately strung words together as she kept a hold on her voice, which threatened to tremble with agitation.

However—

“Disqualify her!”

—a shout came from the audience.

“If she didn’t refine the silver sugar herself, then disqualify her!”

Anne felt the impact of their criticism as if she had been struck by stones. It took all her effort to keep herself from staggering over.

How? Why?

Nothing but questions swirled around in her head, and she couldn’t think straight.

“Wait a minute. That’s the crafter who made the sugar candy for the former Duke of Philax. There’s no way that she doesn’t know how to refine silver sugar!”

“That’s right, there’s been some kind of mistake.”

“I’ve bought candy from that girl before! Both the finished piece and the silver sugar it was made from were top-notch.”

Other attendees raised their voices. When they did, the people who had jeered at her first shouted back at them with contempt.

“You’ve all been fooled!”

“Didn’t she cause some kind of issue last year, too?”

“That’s rich, coming from a guy who’s never bought one of her candies!”

“It’s some sort of mistake.”

“We can’t trust that little girl!”

The bickering gradually spread through the crowd. In a fit of anger, the spectators began grabbing one another by the collars.

“She’s disqualified!”

“What did you say?!”

As the arguments escalated, guards ran over and pointed their spears at the audience. They shouted for everyone to be quiet.

“Silence!”

A booming voice resounded over the noise of the plaza. Its volume and intensity made the crowd go quiet.

At the front of the plaza, in the tent before the castle, stood the members of the royal family. In the middle of the group was His Majesty, the king of Highland, Edmond II. His eyes were wide as he glared furiously at the rioting crowd and the dumbfounded candy crafters.

That was when Anne finally realized the bell at the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell had finished ringing, and that it had been signaling the arrival of the royal family.

Hugh and Marcus seemed startled as they turned back to face the king. They each got down on one knee and bowed.

Anne also hastily followed suit.

“What is all this fuss? Downing, explain!” the king demanded in the same tone he’d used to silence everyone.

The Earl of Downing immediately rushed over to the king and informed him of the situation.

The king nodded as he listened, and beside him, the queen frowned. She looked out at the crowd, and her gaze came to rest on Anne, who was still hanging her head.

“I see,” the king said. “So you’re telling me that last year, we had a crafter who brought a sculpture of uncertain origin. And this year, we have one who brought silver sugar that they did not refine themselves?”

Then the king looked at Anne as well.

“And that the same person was involved in both incidents?” he asked. “Anne Halford, raise your head. Everyone else, too.”

Anne lifted her head. The king had a blank expression.

“I overlooked the fact that you made a scene at last year’s Royal Candy Fair. But what is the cause of the uproar this time? If you can explain it, please do so.”

“I refined my silver sugar with my own hands and used it to make my candy sculpture. Of that, I am certain. The fairies who are my friends were checking the sugar the whole time I was making my entry piece. But between the time when I finished it and when I transported the remaining three barrels of silver sugar here, someone swapped out my sugar. I don’t know how or when this happened. But I did properly refine my own silver sugar by myself.”

“And are we to take your word that you refined it on your own? You have no proof, do you?” the queen asked.

The king heard her and nodded. “I believe that’s the case. Silver Sugar Viscount. Mercury, how can we settle this?”

Hugh readily answered his question. “Regardless of the reason, if she hasn’t got her own silver sugar on hand right now, she’s not qualified to be here.”

“Throw her out! The liar!”

Another jeer flew at Anne from the audience. She bit her lip.

It’s not a lie... It’s not a lie!

There was no way she could still participate in the contest. With that fact thrust before her, Anne became strangely calm.

Even if I can’t anymore, I’m not telling lies.

She still had her pride, knowing that she had completed her sculpture, and Anne furiously burned with the desire to prove she wasn’t lying. A voice from the past whispered in her ear like an echo.

“You are the finest of candy crafters.”

Those were the words that the duke had said to her with gentle, sad eyes. His compliment gave Anne a push on the back. It told her to fight.

Anne had been looking down, but now she lifted her head suddenly.

“I will give up on participating in the Royal Candy Fair. But I did refine my

silver sugar with my own two hands. I'd like to be allowed to prove that to you, at least. Your Majesty, please allow me to do so!"

"If that is something you can do, you're welcome to try."

When she heard those words, Anne bowed again, stood, and went back to the spot where her sculpture was waiting.

Mithril looked up at Anne with tears running down his face.

"Anne... I'm sorry. I knew about it. But I couldn't fix it in time."

Keith was also looking at her apologetically.

Anne shook her head lightly at the two of them.

"It's fine. There's nothing to be done. I'm a fool for not noticing. But I'm at least going to prove that I'm not a liar. I'll prove that I'm a proper candy crafter."

As she spoke, Anne removed the white cloth that covered her candy sculpture.

The plaza stirred. The king and queen both opened their eyes wide.

"...Beautiful," she heard Hugh mumble.

Anne stood before her sugar candy sculpture of a climbing rose in bloom, which looked like something out of a dream.

"Your Majesty," she said loudly. "Please summon a fairy who you trust. I will prove myself to them."

"A fairy?"

The king signaled the queen with his eyes, and she nodded and called out to the back of the tent, "Clifford. Come here."

At the queen's summons, a tall fairy who looked like a young man dressed in a valet's uniform appeared from behind the tent flap.

"I can rely on him. You may do whatever it is you wish to do."

"Thank you very much."

Anne bent her knees and steeled herself. She stared at her candy sculpture.

Then she placed a hand on one of the flowers of the climbing rose and snapped it right off.

Everyone in the plaza gasped.

For a moment, Anne made a pained face, as if it was her own arm that had been broken. Truly, her chest did hurt.

With the broken flower in her hand, Anne stepped forward in front of the tent again and knelt.

“Please ask him to taste this,” she implored, holding out her sugar rose. “He should be able to tell that it was not made with the mass-produced silver sugar.



“This year, no one has been refining silver sugar on their own, except for the twenty hopefuls here and the one person who pulled out from the contest. I heard that Master Radcliffe had taken the sugar from the person who withdrew before mixing it in with the mass-produced batches. And so assuming everyone else here has provided their three barrels, there should be no extra sugar refined by other individuals. If I really am unable to make my own silver sugar, then my sculpture would have used the mass-produced sugar, and it ought to taste like it. However, if that’s not the case, then I must have used what I refined.” Anne finished her explanation.

She had heard that the silver sugar that Jonas had refined had been mixed into the mass-produced batch the night before. Supposedly, Marcus had personally done it, and this was confirmed by a number of human witnesses.

It was possible that Anne’s silver sugar had met the same fate.

But she still had her sugar candy sculpture, which she’d made with her own silver sugar.

That was her proof.

Clifford looked slightly uncomfortable. But when the queen gave him the signal, he stepped out of the tent and walked over to Anne.

“May I?” he asked Anne, who was still kneeling.

She nodded firmly. “I hope you find it to your liking. Please go ahead.”

“I humbly accept.”

Clifford took the rose and held it in his palm. The flower softly dissolved and disappeared, as it was being absorbed into his hand. Clifford smiled a little. Then he said quietly, “It’s delicious. Incredibly delicious.”

The fairy looked back at the king.

“This was made with very high-quality silver sugar,” he said. “The flavor that I get from the essence of the piece is splendid, too, but it’s really the craftsmanship of the silver sugar that stands out.”

The king shifted his gaze back to Anne.

“Surely, she must have refined it. But where did that silver sugar go?”

“I do not know. But as long as you understand that I refined the silver sugar on my own and made this sculpture with it, I’m satisfied. My apologies for causing a disturbance. I’m very sorry. I’ll be leaving now.”

Anne bowed deeply. She felt like her tears might spill over. But she managed to hold them in and rose to her feet. She turned her back to the king and started to walk back to the table where her sugar candy was sitting. She passed by Hugh’s side on the way.

Hugh grabbed Anne’s arm.

“Wait. Look, Anne,” he whispered.

There was a woman with long golden hair walking slowly toward them from the edge of the plaza. Behind the young woman followed a beautiful fairy with striking black eyes. It was Bridget and Challe.

The Earl of Downing approached them, and Bridget said something to him. The earl looked surprised and rushed back to the king’s side.

“Your Majesty,” the Earl of Downing said. “Just now, the daughter of Glen Paige, the maestro of the Paige Workshop, has arrived. She says that she knows the whereabouts of the silver sugar refined by Anne Halford, and that she wants to report it to the Silver Sugar Viscount and to you, Your Majesty.”

“What?”

“Would it be all right if I call her over?”

“That’s fine. Bring her here.”

With an unenthusiastic gait, Bridget walked up to the king and knelt.

Anne was completely confused. What was Bridget doing here, and why did she know the whereabouts of Anne’s silver sugar? Plus, why were she and Challe together?

“I am Bridget, the daughter of Glen Paige, the maestro of the Paige Workshop. I have come here because I know the whereabouts of the silver sugar that the crafter standing over there, Anne Halford, refined. I’m here to settle the confusion.”

“Where is the silver sugar?”

In response to Hugh’s question, Bridget pointed to the edge of the plaza where the barrels full of silver sugar were standing, the ones that the twenty hopefuls entering the Royal Candy Fair had brought with them.

“Over there. There should be three barrels that have the name *Jones* written on them. They do not contain silver sugar that was refined by Sammy Jones, but by Anne Halford.”

“What did you say?!” Marcus was the one who raised his voice. He turned to look sternly at Sammy. “Please tell me this is some kind of false accusation!”

Sammy went pale at the sound of Marcus’s voice. The maestro stormed over to him, grabbed his arm, and dragged him toward Hugh.

“Explain to him that this is a false accusation from the Paige Workshop, Sammy.”

Sammy looked around at the king, Marcus, Hugh, Anne, and Mithril. He was breathing hard.

“Sorry, Sammy Jones,” Bridget said indifferently. “I saw you. I wasn’t planning on saying anything, but circumstances have changed.”

While all this was going on, the guard brought Sammy’s sugar barrels over. Hugh opened the lids and beckoned to Clifford.

“Clifford. Please check the flavor of the silver sugar. You ate a piece of Halford’s sculpture, so you should be able to tell immediately whether they have the same flavor.”

“Understood.”

Clifford promptly scooped up some of the silver sugar from one of the barrels into his palm. It dissolved before their eyes. Once it disappeared, a look of surprise appeared on Clifford’s face.

“This silver sugar has the same flavor as Ms. Halford’s candy sculpture. Without question, it is the same sugar.”

“Unbelievable...,” Marcus muttered in despair. He turned to look at Sammy.

Sammy dropped to his knees on the spot.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I just wanted to defend the good name of the Radcliffe Workshop!”

“You fool!”

Marcus lost control and punched the side of Sammy’s face.

“Then why did you bring and use Halford’s silver sugar to enter the candy fair? How shameless can you be?”

“Forgive me, please.”

“Why should I?!”

“Because I just thought...how great it would be if this silver sugar...was something that I made.”

As a candy crafter himself, he hadn’t been able to fight the temptation to claim the exquisitely refined silver sugar as his own.

Ordinarily, it would have been impossible to prove that the silver sugar in the barrels was Anne’s. If Sammy had insisted it was his, there would be no way to disprove it. That had probably set him at ease.

However, he never could have expected that Anne would break her own sculpture to prove the flavor of the sugar she used—no one could have imagined it.

“This is the silver sugar that Anne Halford refined. Which means, Sammy Jones, that you do not have any silver sugar of your own making. You are disqualified.”

At Hugh’s words, Marcus hung his head.

“This man is my responsibility, so allow me to take him out of here. I will also give him the appropriate punishment. Fortunately, the Royal Candy Fair has yet to formally begin. I assume you have no objections? As the faction’s maestro, I’ll take accountability and deal with this.”

“That sounds fine. Is it all right, Your Majesty?” Hugh asked.

The king nodded. “We will entrust this matter to him. I want that man thrown

out of here, and I want Halford back in her proper place and for Downing to announce the beginning of the candy fair.”

Hugh and the Earl of Downing bowed sharply in unison.

The king and queen took their seats.

“Well, you heard the man. Anne, go back to your spot.”

Hugh turned to her and winked playfully.

“But, Hugh, my candy sculpture is already...”

“You can still participate, though. Even if you can’t win the royal medal. You are a real candy crafter, right? So you can take part.”

“Ah, mm. Yes!”

Anne answered energetically and turned back to face Bridget.

“Thank you, Bridget.”

“You don’t need to thank me. I’ve already got my reward.”

“Huh?”

Without pause, Bridget walked off toward the edge of the plaza where Challe was standing. Anne looked at him, trying to ask for the meaning behind Bridget’s words, and he nodded, as if to tell her not to worry.

Challe found my silver sugar for me.

Her heart was brimming with gratitude. She nodded back at him and returned to her own spot.

When Anne returned, Mithril climbed up onto her shoulder, blubbering tearfully. “Anne, your candy is broken, isn’t it? Now you’ll never win the royal medal.”

“It’s fine.”

Anne nodded at Keith as well.

“I got them to acknowledge that I am not a liar and that I’m a proper candy crafter.”

Once Sammy had been led away and the confusion had been resolved, the

Earl of Downing returned to his own tent and quickly straightened out his disordered clothes. Then he raised his hand with dignity and spoke loudly to the crowd.

“I hereby announce the opening of the Royal Candy Fair. We promise to award the distinction of Silver Sugar Master to the most outstanding candy crafter in the kingdom.”

The official running the candy fair issued instructions to the crafters.

“Everyone. You will now show His Majesty your sugar candy sculptures.”

All the participants except for Anne removed the sheets covering their pieces.

Anne could hear a whispered commotion break out among the spectators.

The king and queen took a cursory look at the sculptures that were lined up before them.

Their eyes came to an abrupt stop when they reached Keith’s.

The king leaned forward even more.

“Oh wow... This is an incredibly elegant fairy. It’s perfect. The phrase *without fault* must refer to something like this. I have never seen a better representation of a fairy rendered in sugar candy.”

Then his eyes glanced back at Anne’s sugar candy sculpture.

“Yet I am also fascinated by Halford’s piece. Her climbing rose made from fairy wings is like something out of a dream. It has an indescribably mellow feeling to it... It’s very difficult to choose between them.”

At that point, the king paused briefly and sat back in his seat.

“I’m sure I would have a hard time making a decision if that one wasn’t broken. In a case like this, where both sculptures are so excellent, I suppose I must naturally choose the one that is still intact.”

At his praise, Keith had started to break into a smile, but when he heard the king continue with his evaluation of Anne’s sugar candy, his expression fell apologetically.

Anne had already known the outcome going in, so she had accepted it. Just

hearing the king's words was plenty for her.

His Majesty said that my work was outstanding. I'm happy just to still be standing here.

Keith's sugar candy sculpture was a perfect depiction of Challe Fenn Challe. Anyone would have agreed that it was incredibly beautiful.

Anne didn't think there was any way her work could rival such a splendid piece. It was impossible to hope she could win with a broken candy sculpture.

The only thing that disappointed her was that she hadn't been able to compete on a level playing field against Keith. He had always recognized her as a candy crafter on equal footing with himself.

"Downing, what is that crafter's name?" the king asked.

"He is Keith Powell," the earl quietly answered. "The son of the former Silver Sugar Viscount."

"I see, so it runs in his blood? Certainly, Powell was known for his handsome candy sculptures. Well then, let me decide. That candy sculpture of a fairy..."

The king was about to say something, but he stopped.

He had noticed the queen, who was sitting beside him, suddenly but silently pointing with the tip of her closed fan toward a certain spot. The king looked at where the fan was directed and made a startled expression.

"That's...the fairy."

"Yes, it's the fairy. The model for that candy sculpture."

The queen was pointing at Challe, who was watching the procedure intently from the edge of the plaza.

Even in the weak autumn light, he was the image of regal power, and he naturally drew many looks.

His handsome face and his cold, brilliant black eyes made quite the impression, as did the strength of will in his gaze. Even Anne, who was accustomed to looking at him, found her eyes unconsciously drawn to his sharp, beguiling luster, which had been carved from a piece of obsidian.

“That candy crafter flawlessly and exactly reproduced a beautiful fairy. Certainly, it is a perfect reproduction. And amazing, without a doubt. But please take a look. See how gorgeous that fairy is? Which do you think is more beautiful, Your Majesty, that fairy or the sugar candy made to look like him?”

At the queen’s words, Keith looked astounded, as if he had suddenly realized something. Then he mumbled, “I see...! So then I...”

“What a foolish question you ask. An imitation cannot compare to the beauty of the real thing. No matter how perfectly replicated, it is only sugar candy...”

The king got that far into his answer, then made an expression like he had surprised even himself. He looked back and forth between Keith’s sculpture and Anne’s.

The king’s words made Anne remember the sugar candy sculpture of Christina that she had created for the Duke of Philax. She recalled that he had said her sculpture was the very image of Christina.

But there was no way a lifeless sugar candy could be more gorgeous than a real person with the spark of life.

That was why Duke Alburn had looked so miserable.

“A sugar candy that perfectly represents a real fairy. And one that captures a dreamlike vision. The fact is that both of them are so beautiful, it’s hard to choose. So which one is more appealing? Isn’t one of them superior in that sense, Your Majesty?”

When he heard the queen’s composed words, the king mumbled, “More appealing, huh? If that’s the question, then one of them does stand out.”

After a long period of silence, the king continued:

“...But it’s too bad.”

When the king finally uttered those words, the queen chuckled.

“What do you mean, Your Majesty?” she asked.

“It’s too bad that Halford’s candy sculpture is broken. No matter how beautiful and appealing it may be...”

Then suddenly, the queen started giggling.

“So it’s broken; what of it? That doesn’t change the fact that it’s lovely. Actually, I think that makes the piece even more charming.”

“What?”

“This is not a space for seeking perfection. It is where you select the most beautiful sugar candy. And a place where you look for the qualities that make a Silver Sugar Master. That crafter who broke her own sculpture, what do you think of her, as an artist? How about selecting the piece that your heart wants?”

At the queen’s words, the king burst out laughing. He couldn’t contain himself. “You say we are not here to seek perfection?! Why, that’s pure sophistry, my queen!” He chuckled. “And of the most extreme kind. But of course, that’s not a problem. I shall decide based on which one I like the most.”

The king stood.

“Keith Powell.”

The king called his name quietly. Keith answered with a nervous expression.

“Yes.”

“Your sugar candy sculpture is perfect. And it probably would have been even more alluring if the fairy you used as your model had not appeared. Your piece likely would have won.”

Keith seemed to realize the meaning behind the king’s words. He hung his head and smiled bitterly.

“I understand, Your Majesty.”

When he heard that, the king nodded slowly, then shifted his gaze slightly and looked at Anne.

“Then I will make the announcement,” the king solemnly declared. “I have decided to award the royal medal to the sugar candy sculpture made by Anne Halford. The person who made that piece will be this year’s Silver Sugar Master.”

Anne was flabbergasted by this development.

Huh?

The crowd was astir.

No one could believe their ears, including Anne.

Even Hugh was dumbfounded. His mouth formed the words *No way*.

“Anne Halford. Come forward,” the Earl of Downing instructed her.

But Anne was in a daze. She didn’t move.

“Anne! Anne! Hey, Anne!”

Mithril tugged on Anne’s hair.

Keith approached her and gave her a gentle push on the shoulder.

“Anne. Go forward. You’re receiving the royal medal!”

Mithril hopped over to Keith’s shoulder.

“Anne, get going!”

Between Mithril’s words of encouragement and Keith’s gentle hand on her back, Anne staggered unsteadily forward. Hugh stepped out of the tent and pulled her along by the hand. Then once he had led her to the king, he placed his hands lightly on her shoulders.

“Kneel, Anne. Bow before the one giving you this honor.”

Once Anne did as instructed, reality finally hit her. Her whole body began to tremble.

“I grant you the royal medal,” said the king softly. “You are this year’s Silver Sugar Master. Hold out your hands.”

Anne held them out while still bowing.

A chilly weight was placed into her palms.

“Raise your head.”

When Anne did as she was told and lifted her head, the king and queen were gazing at her with admiration.

“Live your life cherishing the sacred, as a creator of the sacred.”

In her palms was a hexagonal medal carved from a rare, pure-white stone and polished to a glossy finish. It was engraved with a complicated climbing-rose pattern.

I've seen this before.

Anne had spied on her mother, Emma, gazing now and then at an identical medal, alone in the middle of the night.

She had always done it when they were having a hard time.

Sometimes when Anne was sniffing tearfully about whether her mother would have the strength to walk and continue forward the next day, Emma would secretly gaze at her medal late at night. Then, the next morning, she would be wearing a surprisingly cheerful smile.

Her mother had never told her what that white hexagonal object was. But it was her medal. Now it was resting forever with Emma.

Mama.

She probably expected that someday, Anne would become a Silver Sugar Master in her own right. And when that happened, she would finally understand the significance of that object.

This is my medal.

Anne bowed again and answered in a strong voice. "I will live my life as a creator of the sacred forevermore."

"I trust you will."

The king accepted Anne's words and turned on his heel. The queen followed suit, and they left the tent.

Even after the royal family had departed, the plaza was still in an uproar.

"Well. You can go now," Hugh said.

Anne stood slowly, and he patted her on the head. "So it looks like there was nothing wrong with my judgment," he said. "Go on, Keith Powell and your little friend are waiting for you. Get going."

"Thank you, Hugh."

“I didn’t do anything this time, though. Ah, uh-oh. That’s no good. Is that Kat coming from over there? I’m getting out of here before he has a chance to corner me.”

Hugh turned aside to dodge Kat.

Anne nimbly dashed over to where Keith and Mithril were standing. “Mithril Lid Pod! Keith!” she shouted.

Keith embraced Anne tightly as she cheerfully bounded toward him. He was smiling bitterly.

“I am a fool, aren’t I? I didn’t need to worry about you at all.”

“Huh?”

“My sculpture was perfect. Probably even better than yours. But I was anxious. I didn’t know why, but I was. Now I understand the reason. My sugar candy perfectly represented a beautiful fairy, just as he is. That was enough to make it stunning. But the effect was ruined when the real Challe appeared. Sugar candy will never be a match for the beauty of the real thing. No matter how well I replicate it, in the end, it’s just candy. But your sculpture is a vision, Anne. You grabbed hold of an idea and gave it form. There isn’t anything in existence to compare it to. So it fascinates people all the more.”

At that point, Keith looked down at the royal medal in Anne’s hands. “Next year, I’m definitely going to get mine,” he said. “Once I do, I’d like to compete with you again. I learned something from today’s match. The next time I go up against you, I intend to win. Just because you proved yourself a better artist, that doesn’t necessarily mean I’ve lost to you.”

“Mm. All right then, we’ll have another round. But I don’t think I’m going to lose to you, either.”

Anne grinned. When she did, Keith laughed out loud. Then he suddenly flashed his usual gentle smile and held out his right hand.

“Thank you. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Me too.”

Anne gripped his hand tightly.

The intensity of Keith's eyes and the warmth of his handshake made Anne feel happy, even as they challenged each other with smiles on their faces. She was eager to compete against Keith again. And she didn't want to lose to him next time, either. That wasn't out of animosity. It came from a place of respect.

Keith let go of Anne's hand and patted her on the shoulder. "Well, Anne. I suppose you ought to go thank Challe soon. He's the one who persuaded Bridget to cooperate. You've got to show off your medal to him first."

"Yeah. I have to thank Challe. Where is he?"

She surveyed her surroundings, looking for his black eyes.

She spotted him standing with Bridget at the edge of the plaza.

"Challe!"

She took off running in his direction, but Challe discreetly held his hand up, signaling her to stop where she was. Anne was curious, but she came to a halt. Then Challe said something to Bridget and walked over to Anne.

"Challe, look, the royal medal. It's all because of you. Thank you. See, it's really pretty." She held up the white medal with both hands and showed it to him.

He smiled. It was a tender but pained smile that threatened to steal her heart away. "You are a Silver Sugar Master. You hold your future in your hands. There's...nothing for me to worry about now."

That was all Challe said before he turned to go.

Startled, Anne clutched her royal medal to her chest with one hand and grabbed Challe's arm with the other.

"Wait, Challe. Where are you going?"

"I can't be with you anymore."

Anne's mind went blank for a moment. It was like she had been slapped in the face. She let go of his arm.

".....Uh....."

“There’s no time. Bridget ordered me to come back right away. I’m going now.”

“Why can’t you be with us...? Why not? Have you gotten sick of being together? I know I’m stupid, and I caused you nothing but trouble, so—”

“That’s not it.”

“I’m sorry. I won’t do weird things from now on. I’ll try really hard. So—”

“That’s not it, Anne,” he said painfully.

The next moment, he hugged her close, as if he could no longer resist. Then he planted a forceful kiss on Anne’s cheek.

“I didn’t want to part with you,” he whispered desperately.

Then Challe pushed Anne away from him and turned his back to her. As if making a clean break, he walked off toward Bridget without looking back.

All the strength drained from Anne’s body, and she sank to the ground where she stood.

A weak autumn breeze blew past her. The commotion in the plaza was far away. She could see Keith and Mithril and Kat walking slowly over to her. But she couldn’t form any thoughts, and she couldn’t stand back up.

Clutching her royal medal tightly to her chest with both hands, she couldn’t move.

A hand was extended before her.

“This won’t do, for a young lady to sit on the ground in a place like this. Your dress will get dirty, you know?”

It was Elliott Collins. He was looking down at her with his winsome, drooping eyes.

“How pitiful it is for you not to know. I am a friend to all women, so let me tell you what happened,” he said.

“Elliott...Collins?”

“In order to get the location of your silver sugar, that fairy gave Bridget his wing.”

His wing...? For my silver sugar...?

While Anne's mind was reeling from the shock, he continued with a devastating follow-up.

"For your sake," he said, "that fairy sold his freedom."

Then Elliott put on a slightly sadistic-looking smile.

"Now, what are you going to do about that, Anne?"



AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone, how are you getting along? This is Miri Mikawa.

This is the third volume of *Sugar Apple Fairy Tale*. Even though it's the third installment, for some reason, I got confused and used the wrong format when I was writing my manuscript. But things turned out okay, and I was able to publish the book for all of you to read, so I'm happy about that. What a relief. Thank goodness.

This volume covers the period between the end of the last book until late November.

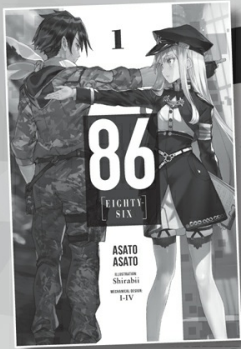
The first two were basically about Anne, Challe, and Mithril traveling aimlessly. But this time, with the setting being what it was, many new characters were introduced. I hope that made it more fun to read.

Now then, once again, I can hardly look my manager in the eye after causing her all sorts of trouble. I'm working as hard as I possibly can, so I'm counting on your support going forward. I'm also grateful from the bottom of my heart to Aki, who always draws such wonderful illustrations for me.

And to all my readers, truly, truly, thank you. The cold weather has arrived, but I hope you are spending your days happily and having fun!

Miri Mikawa

HAVE YOU BEEN TURNED ON TO LIGHT NOVELS YET?



86—EIGHTY-SIX, VOL. 1-11

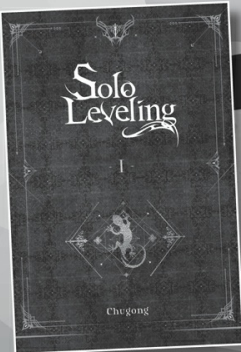
In truth, there is no such thing as a bloodless war. Beyond the fortified walls protecting the eighty-five Republic Sectors lies the "nonexistent" Eighty-Sixth Sector. The young men and women of this forsaken land are branded the Eighty-Six and, stripped of their humanity, pilot "unmanned" weapons into battle...

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WOLF & PARCHMENT, VOL. 1-6

The young man Col dreams of one day joining the holy clergy and departs on a journey from the bathhouse, Spice and Wolf. Winfiel Kingdom's prince has invited him to help correct the sins of the Church. But as his travels begin, Col discovers in his luggage a young girl with a wolf's ears and tail named Myuri, who stowed away for the ride!

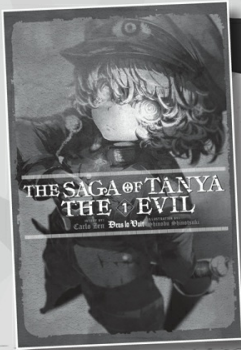
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SOLO LEVELING, VOL. 1-7

E-rank hunter Jinwoo Sung has no money, no talent, and no prospects to speak of—and apparently, no luck, either! When he enters a hidden double dungeon one fateful day, he's abandoned by his party and left to die at the hands of some of the most horrific monsters he's ever encountered.

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THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL, VOL. 1-11

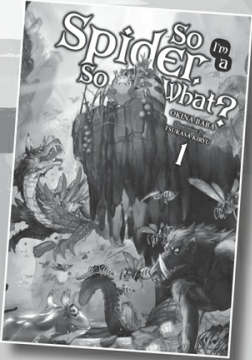
Reborn as a destitute orphaned girl with nothing to her name but memories of a previous life, Tanya will do whatever it takes to survive, even if it means living life behind the barrel of a gun!

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SO I'M A SPIDER, SO WHAT?, VOL. 1-15

I used to be a normal high school girl, but in the blink of an eye, I woke up in a place I've never seen before and—and I was reborn as a spider?!

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OVERLORD, VOL. 1-15

When Momonga logs in one last time just to be there when the servers go dark, something happens—and suddenly, fantasy is reality. A rogues' gallery of fanatically devoted NPCs is ready to obey his every order, but the world Momonga now inhabits is not the one he remembers.

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